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by John Jakes

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According to you...

Dear Editor:

I think it's about time I took sides in the Bunch controversy. I'm all for him. He's a great writer. Previous to this, I admit, I have been quite impartial to his stuff. His first few stories, I recall, interested me, but I became quite bored with later ones; also, degradations of him by others affected my thinking.

The controversy died down for a while, as did Mr. B's contributions, but now that he's back again, I feel I must comment. The thing that many readers seem to object to in Bunch is his style of writing. I know I'm not qualified to go into that in any depth, but I can say—it is unique, or as close to being so as anything I have ever read. The typical reader has fallen into a stereotyped, patterned way of thinking and reading, and being too lazy to change his ways, he rebels at anything revolutionary. Therefore, he doesn't like Bunch.

I am quite sure that if some of his greatest antagonists just once sat down and read a story by him with an *open mind*, they would realize the quality and importance of his writings.

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N.Y.

● *That's what we've been saying all along.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

T. C. Lethbridge, in "Ghost and Ghoul" in your January issue, offers ideas which your editorial refers to as "Lethbridge's theories." Those same old ideas have been continually offered, time after time for years, by a host of writers with the misconception that they are original.

Lethbridge's comment, "The way we have been brought up to look at the world may be entirely fictitious," is a gem marred only by timidity in the phrase "may

(Continued on page 127)

IF late is still better than never, we'd like to take a few inches of space to call your attention to a collection of Bob Bloch's fan magazine writings which was published a few months ago by Advent: Publishers. Titled *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*, the book "pickles for posterity" the outpourings of 25 years of comedy, vitriol, satire, argument, and just plain observations of Bob Bloch, sf fan.

Perhaps the quickest way to give you a brief idea of the contents is to mention just a few of the titles of the essays: *Gafia House*, *McGuffey's First SF Reader*, *The Demolishel Fan*, *How to Attend an SF Convention*, and *From Hubbub Horizontal*. There are also some Blochian poems, including the famous *Non-Lewis Carol*. As Bloch says in his preface: "A professional writer is a man who writes for money and believes that only an idiot gives away his work for nothing. Shake hands with an idiot." But if you read the book (available from Advent, P.O. Box 9228, Chicago 10, Ill., for \$1.95), you will wish everyone was Bloch's kind of idiot.

* * *

WHEN they tell you that electronic computers are getting increasingly sophisticated, they aren't just blowing out air, boy. Stanford University scientists now have one—called Madaline, by the way—that has learned to get along with its own handicaps and problems.

Madaline was built to take in data and figure out *for itself* what it is supposed to find out from the data, without being programmed in machine language for the specific problem. It is an attempt to develop machines that can think for themselves after being given a basic grounding in the facts of electronic life. Such adaptability is vital in space-rocket systems, for example, where the malfunction of a single switch can ruin a multi-million-dollar test.

When Madaline was first put together she contained—on purpose—parts that didn't function, or didn't function properly: short circuits, open circuits, bollixed-up wiring etc. Still, when Madaline was turned on, she worked just fine.

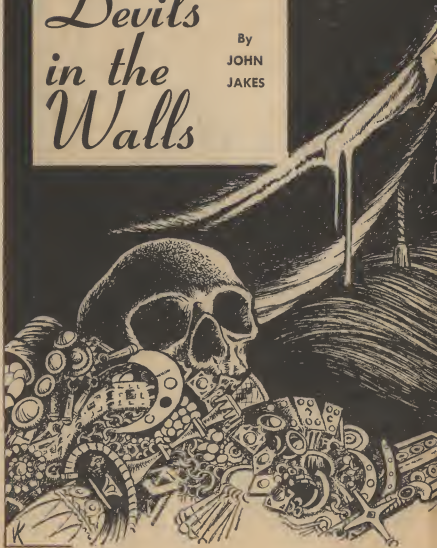
Which is more than we can usually manage to do.

—NL



Devils in the Walls

By
JOHN
JAKES





Illustrator KRAMER

Evil glistened on the ruined turrets. Leprous laughter shrieked in Brak's ears. Shrugging, the barbarian shambled on to meet the Devils in the Walls.

WHAT am I bid?" cried the auctioneer of the slave market. "What am I bid for this yellow-headed barbarian fresh-caught on the road which leads down from the high steppes?"

Before anyone in the crowd could make an offer, Brak formed a loop of the chains which held him fast to the stone pillar. With a lunge he fastened the iron loop about the neck of the auctioneer. There was a terrible fury in his gigantic body. He had been riding peacefully through the cool morning air of the plain a few leagues from this accursed village when the slavers set upon him. Even now he could see the crafty face of the leader of the slavers, a weasel named Zaldeb, off there among the gawkers. *Well, thought Brak as he tightened the chains and dragged the auctioneer threshing to the concrete at the base of the pillar, I took four of Zaldeb's hirelings before they broke my broadsword and slew my pony, I can take one jackal more before I die . . .*

The crowd roared and shrank back at the spectacle. The wide-

shouldered man, naked save for a garment of lion's hide about his hips, fell atop the auctioneer and choked the breath from him in a space of seconds.

But Brak was not destined to gain his revenge just then. Up from behind the pillar rushed a crowd of the bullies who tended the town's now-empty slave pens. They carried leather lashes. They swung them with considerable pleasure. At the end of another moment, Brak had been whipped close to blindness. He slumped against the stone pillar as the auctioneer tottered to his feet, re-arranged his robes, massaged his throat and delivered a vicious kick to the guts of the fallen warrior.

Brak lurched forward on hands and knees, blood dripping from a dozen lash-marks in his back. He felt sick, humiliated.

"See how he struggles!" cried the auctioneer. "A veritable demon out of the wild lands to the north. He told the worthy Zaldeb he was bound to seek his fortune in the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward, but for a small price one of you in the crowd can

employ him to improve your own fortune. He has the strength of twelve men! He can turn a mill wheel all day and all night without falling! Now what am I bid? Who will make a generous offer?"

"Ten dinshas," piped the feeble voice of an old man.

"Ten *dinshas*?" sneered the auctioneer. "Yea, graybeard! I know hard times have fallen on the village of Yarah the Bull. Bellies growl in hunger. But can your purse be so thin that you would pass an opportunity to have such a fine slave for your own?"

"Eleven dinshas . . ." came a cry from another quarter of the mob.

"*Make way!*" came a voice which sounded female to Brak. "*I offer five hundred dinshas!*"

"Five hundred . . ." choked the auctioneer. "Do I hear another bid? Then the barbarian is sold to Miranda, daughter of Hamur, Prince of a Thousand Claws." Kicking Brak again, the auctioneer hissed: "And it's fitting that a snarling brute like you should fall in her clutches. If anyone can take the arrogance from you, it's that blood-spotted witch . . ."

BRAC did not like the warning. In a moment he found all but his wrist chains loosened. He was freed from the pillar and hustled

down through the crowd, past the leering Zaldeb into the presence of his purchaser. She was a beautiful dark-haired young woman of comely form, richly attired in veils and girdles sewn with gleaming pearls. He noticed that persons in the crowd were treating him to looks of sorrow and pity. Could it be so unlucky to be sold to such a creature, if he must endure slavery at all? He'd not endure it for long, that much was certain. But it seemed by rights that his fate should be a good one.

Miranda's dark eyes flashed approvingly over his towering form. "I've purchased you at a dear price, barbarian, hoarding my small store of money until the day when at last a man of strength would be sold in this market. That day has been a long time in coming."

"Call me Brak, not barbarian," he growled angrily. "I'm as civilized as you fine people, and perhaps more, lacking the refinements to indulge in the practice of slavery."

"Can you use a blade as well as you employ your tongue?" Miranda asked mockingly.

"Inquire of the jackal there," Brak replied, shaking his chains at Zaldeb, who cowered back.

Before Miranda could say more, the crowd parted and a lesser official of the town announced the arrival of the gov-

ernor, Yarah the Bull. Brak looked up anxiously. He hoped to find Yarah a man to whom he could appeal. But the sight of the fat and richly clad noble upon an emaciated gray horse convinced him the plea would be futile. Yarah the Bull, perhaps once a brave warrior, had now fallen into sloth. On second glance, his rich apparel looked threadbare. He peered out at Brak above pouchy cheeks purpled by wine.

"So this is the stranger," he mused warily. "I rather regret I arrived so late . . . I could use a strong arm in my household. And I could have given you better treatment than you'll receive from that accursed creature."

Miranda ignored the jibe as Yarah continued, "However, don't trouble my ear with appeals for freedom. Slave-catching is legal in our province. In fact," Yarah added sadly, "Zaldeb the slaver is the only man among us turning a profit these days. We've fallen into hard times. Our crops turn bad. Our people starve. Perhaps your presence will divert us from our misery. Provided you live past moonset . . ."

Shaking his head in a baffled and ineffectual manner, Yarah the Bull touched rusted spurs to his spindly mount and clattered off. Miranda tugged Brak's wrist chains and led him from the square.

Why, Brak wondered, did people continue to stare at him as though he were condemned to death? The girl seemed harmless enough. Perhaps she only wanted a companion for her couch . . .

HE learned nothing, however, on the walk to Miranda's house at the edge of the village. It was small, poorly furnished, and of a dismal state matching others like it in the poverty-ridden town. When Brak had settled himself grudgingly upon a carpet beside an oil lamp, Miranda knelt opposite him and spoke:

"Would you be interested in knowing why I paid all the money I had to purchase you?"

Brak helped himself to a vessel of wine, finding the contents poor, watery stuff. "If you wish to tell me. I've no stomach for chains. I'd as soon strangle you as make polite talk." Swilling some wine, Brak wiped his mouth with the back of a brawny arm.

"I bought you," Miranda said softly, strange lights in her dark eyes, "that I might give you a certain task to perform, and when it is done, unlock your chains and set you free."

"And this task," Brak responded sourly, "will take me but eighty and eight years?"

"No, not if you have the courage for it, and the wits. It will take but an hour or two."

Brak sat up stiffly, his bronze face threatening. "If you are making sport of me . . ."

Shaking her head, Miranda led him to a window. In the distance, at the top of a sloping hill, stood a crumbling pile of stone. Its damp walls shone with a faint slimy radiance in the first moonbeams. "That was once the palace of my father," Miranda breathed. "Prince Hamur . . . Hamur of a Thousand Claws, so-called because he kept a thousand hunting leopards in cages below the ground. He's long dead. But he left a three-fold legacy behind him." Dark eyes glowing wildly, Miranda raised three fingers, slowly bending one down and saying, "There is a treasure in those ruins . . . the store of fifty years of plundering caravans. A treasure rich beyond belief, and mine by right. Secondly, there are a few of the fierce leopards left, not many. Third . . . there are demons haunting the walls."

"I'll doubt none of the three," Brak grunted. "I've fallen among mad people."

"Years ago, when I was a child," Miranda explained, "my father attacked a rich caravan a few leagues to the westward. He slew three dozen souls travelling with it. But a certain magician among the company threw a black curse upon Prince Hamur, promising that the tormented

souls of the three dozen victims would dwell forever in the great hall of the castle where the execution took place. Their blood still smears the walls, great brown patches of it. And they live within and beneath these hideous stains. Their avenging spirits slew my father and mother, drove my nurse and me from those walls, and left the ruins which you see. Even tonight the demons stand guard over the hoard none has carried away. In the past, a few thieves have tried to bring forth the riches still heaped in the central hall. The results . . ."

Miranda hesitated. "I would not mask the seriousness of it. The consequences have been ghastly. Yet these thieves were a dull, witless pack. For a man of courage and cunning, besting the fiends might be a task within his power. I have spent my days waiting for such a one." A pause. "You, Brak."

"My choice is to enter the palace or remain forever in slavery?" Brak's eyes narrowed. "Answer me one question. What's to prevent me strangling your soft throat this instant?"

"The fact," replied Miranda with a clever smile, "that you are a man with some kind of honor, for all your barbarian looks. I can read that in your gaze. It's my hold on you."

SAVAGELY sinking his teeth into his lip in anger, Brak turned away. Gods curse him, Miranda was right. The wise and clever man would slay her instantly, but he could not. Swinging around with a clank of his chains he growled, "Say again, in exact words, what I must do."

"Bring forth the treasure," Miranda whispered. "Bring it forth, and you are free."

Brak hesitated only a moment. "Then put out the lamp and let me put down my head to sleep. If I'm to duel with beasts and monsters, I'll need fresh brains and strength . . ."

But in spite of the soothing unguents Miranda applied to draw the sting from the lash-wounds in his back, Brak never closed an eye during the whole long night. His gaze returned again and again to the palace of Hamur upon the hill. Its slimy, decayed walls gleamed eerily in the moonlight while ravens croaked and flapped against the moon above its ruined battlements. Finally a chill, mist-hung dawn broke ominously in the east. Miranda appeared at the chamber door with a tiny key. This she used to unlock his wrist chains. Then, from a wrapping of scarlet cloth, she unfolded a broadsword of gleaming iron, unspotted by rust, its hilt set with jewels.

"This is all I can offer you, Brak, but it was a mighty weapon in the hands of Hamur of a Thousand Claws . . ."

Brak swung the blade once and nodded. "The balance and temper seem good." A chill crawled on his spine. "Come, let's climb the hill. The day is dark, but I'd rather enter now than when night-creatures walk . . ." They proceeded to the courtyard of the house and mounted a mangy pair of white donkeys.

Miranda led the way along a rocky path up the hillside. Brak noted that the rooftops of the village thronged with citizens watching their progress. He began to feel more like a sacrificial ram with every passing instant. And the coming of daylight had not lessened the forbidding aspect of Hamur's haunted palace. Obscene shrouds of clammy mist wound about its crumbled towers. As they drew nearer, Brak could clearly see trickles of brackish water dribbling down among the stones and foul growths of mold on the walls. A nauseous stench rose in his nostrils. Miranda covered her face with a bit of silk, using her other hand to apply a short braided quirt to her donkey's flanks. They had progressed roughly halfway up the hillside when Brak heard a clattering of hooves behind them.

He swung about, massive

hand dropping to the jeweled hilt of Hamur's broadsword. Their pursuer was a stout, bald man, wearing a gray robe and cowl and riding a shaggy pony. He reined in beside them, panting. Brak saw the crucifix of a Nestorian priest swinging at the cording about his middle.

"In the name of God, Miranda!" the new arrival cried. "I beg you control your greed and keep this helpless slave from going to his death!"

"Helpless!" Brak roared. "Priest or no, that's one term no man can apply to me . . ."

"Don't soil your lips arguing with the fool," Miranda spat angrily, wheeling her donkey between the Newtorian's pony and Brak's mount. "Begone, Friar Jerome. Take your pious words and hypocritical pratings out of the range of my ears. You are interested in matters of the spirit," Miranda went on cuttingly, "and I also. But my spirits are the ones infesting the walls of the House of a Thousand Claws. And once they're dealt with, there's a tangible reward to be had, which is far more than you promise." Tugging on her donkey's bridle, she started off, adding, "Follow me, Brak. Ignore the meddler."

STARING straight into Brak's eyes, as if in an effort to convince the yellow-haired warrior

of the seriousness of his words, Friar Jerome said, "Whoever you may be, take heed of what I tell you. The creatures haunting the bloody walls of Hamur are things of the pit . . . foul essences born of a curse of revenge. No matter how cruel the murders of that maid's father, the revenge taken by the . . . the *things* . . . inhabiting yon ruins have made them the equal of Hamur himself in evil service of the Dark Prince." Fumbling at his waistcord, the Nestorian unloosed the crucifix and held it out. "Naked steel will do you no good without the strength of the powers of light as your armor. Take this cross as symbol . . ."

Without warning Miranda wheeled her donkey, raised her quirt and lashed Friar Jerome cruelly in the face. The priest cried out, reeled and tumbled from his saddle onto the rocky earth. Blood dripped from his cheekbone. "Your soul will be damned in eternity, Miranda! Every man in the village below knows you're sending an innocent and blameless creature to die just so your greed may be slaked. You'll regret . . ."

The Nestorian's plaintive cries were lost behind a rattle of hooves as Brak's donkey bolted on up the slope when Miranda gave its bridle a tug. By the time Brak caught the girl, a veil of

fury had darkened his brow. He shouted, "What sort of heartless . . .?"

In answer she spun around and laid a quirt stingingly across his neck, shrieking, "*Silence!* Say no more! By law you're still my slave, to obey me, not to question me . . .!"

So saying, she urged her mount to the crest of the slope. There she climbed down into the mist curling poisonously along the ground. A raven flapped up, crying shrilly. The fetid stench billowing out from the wrecked portcullis across the rotting planks of a collapsing drawbridge filled Brak with nausea. He peered over the lip of the long-empty moat, seeing only a loathsome bloated rat or two scurrying in the dry bottom. Then he noticed what seemed to be the body of a man flung down among the thorns below, a man dressed in gaudy robes and headcloth. But where the rotting, putrescent remains of his face should have been, a bony skull grinned whitely up at them.

"That is Akronos," Miranda said lightly. "A beggar and thief of Yarah's village. He entered the castle to take the treasure for himself. You see the result."

"His robes look clean and bright," Brak mused. "Yet his skull's bare, as if he had lain down there a year or more." Raising his eyes, Brak asked,

"When did he come here?"

"Three nights ago," replied Miranda, a smile on her darkly beautiful face.

"*Three . . . ?*" Brak's own eyes rounded in horror. "Then . . . what became of . . . *his flesh?*"

Miranda raised a veiled arm and pointed across the rotting bridge. "Didn't I tell you there were devils dwelling in the walls? They await . . ." Abruptly then, she pressed herself against the giant warrior, her wine-scented mouth close to his. "But if you've the courage and skill to bring forth the treasure, and should want to remain with me rather than ride away, free though you'll be . . . why, perhaps I'll be able to reward you with the kind of delight fitting for one who has served well." Passionately she kissed him; but her eyes grew inflamed with rage when he shoved her roughly away.

"I've made one pact with the devil," Brak growled. "I'll not enter into another."

HEFTING the jeweled broadsword of Prince Hamur, Brak strode onto the drawbridge, not glancing back. He felt the eyes of Miranda following him like white-heated daggers.

He crossed a vast courtyard swirling with mist. In the murk

an occasional pile of grisly human bones gleamed whitely. Miranda had given him instructions for finding the great hall, during the first part of their ride up the hill. He located the arched portal which had once been the chief entrance of the palace without difficulty. Once inside, however, even the fetid air of the courtyard seemed a blessing unappreciated.

He passed through long corridors and lofty chambers where once-opulent hangings dropped from the walls in mold-slimed tatters. Rats chittered and scurried in the debris littering the mosaic flooring. Long festoons of congealed dust hung down and brushed Brak's flesh with ghostly caresses. Suddenly a black shape flapped at him. . . . Only when he had brought the broadsword around in a flashing arc and cleaved the thing in half and bent to examine its bloody corpse did he discover it was a species of sharp-fanged vampire bat.

Passing on, Brak came to a vaulted room with a sunken pool in the center. In this pool lay another human skeleton, vast gouges and cracks showing in its skull and breastbone. Brak glanced uneasily about. What inhuman fiends could strip a corpse of its flesh in three days, or leave gaping holes gnawed in solid bone? With a sense of gathering evil, Brak strode on past

the pool. A flight of stairs rose ahead of him. At its summit should be the great hall of Prince Hamur.

Suddenly Brak halted. The hair rose at the nape of his neck. Distantly he heard the unmistakable whisper of feet, sandalled and stealthy. He waited.

The sound did not come again. Somewhere water dripped. Brak stepped over a smashed idol at the base of the steps and began to climb. The jeweled sword was gripped firmly in his right hand. Once he had reached the top of the stairs, he whirled around. He could have sworn the sound of an unseen walker had reached his ears again. "Who's there?" he thundered. "Who is hiding . . . ?"

"*Hiding . . . hiding . . . hiding . . . hiding . . .*" rang the echo through limitless empty rooms and chambers of the dead.

Brak dared not turn. Behind him he'd heard a muffled stirring, a dry, obscene sound not of mortal origin. Then a voice piped, far away:

"*Barbarian, this is your comrade Zaldeb the slave-dealer who follows your path . . .*"

"Come forward, carrion!" Brak roared. "Let me see your face and chop it in half!"

"*I'm hid where you'll never find me,*" gloated the distant, hollow voice. "*But under this rotting ruin six leopards of mighty*

Hamur still live. I've loosed them from their pens. When they've torn you to bits I will slay them at long distance with my bow, and take the treasure for myself. You won't have time to search for the haunts in the walls, barbarian. You'll be occupied with our clawed friends . . ."

Mocking laughter slowly died away.

BRACK heard a faint, animal spitting and knew that the treacherous Zaldeb had not lied. Somewhere not far off, leopards unfed for too long had scented human quarry near at hand. Their savage growls grew louder. Brak turned, raised his sword and hacked through a last fold of mold-green hanging. The rotted stuff fell away and the great hall lay before him.

It was a circular chamber, with many entrances radiating from it. High up in the walls, small circular ports let in gray light and coiling mist. Brak advanced toward the center of the room. His feet struck ornaments of silver and gold strewn over the entire surface of the floor. It was as though he walked in a thick carpet of treasure. The rich loot of the Prince of a Thousand Claws had been spilled out recklessly and in such profusion that its accumulated worth defied his imagination. Then, abruptly, the dry rustling began anew, cou-

pled with a piercing sort of cry.

Brak found his eyes drawn away from the field of gold and jewels underfoot, up to the walls themselves. He caught his breath . . .

When he had first entered he had noticed upon the walls great stained swaths of a darkish-colored substance which he assumed to be mold. Now these stains had begun to shimmer and pulse with a weird deep red light. The moaning, as though lost souls shrieked out in muffled torment, grew more intense. The hideous marks on the walls . . . *blood of Hamur's victims*, Brak thought suddenly . . . began to blur and shift, pulsing with the reddish light, until it seemed that the walls crawled with obscene life.

A black mist began to leak out from these walls. The cry of unseen voices became tuned to a higher pitch, as though the invisible demons no longer lamented, but howled with their lust for his life. The blackish mist spun and churned and billowed toward him. It thickened every second. Brak felt suddenly touched by an inhuman cold that stung his flesh . . .

A new sound greeted his ears. Swinging around, he saw the first cadaverous leopard slink up the staircase and crouch at the chamber's entrance. Its five mates soon followed, incredibly long and bony and deadly. Their

huge yellow eyes watched Brak balefully. Yet the increasing hellish gloom pouring off the writhing walls seemed to check them. A trendril of the dark cloud touched Brak's arm. Agonizing pain shot along his nerves and seized his brain, until he thought his head would fly apart.

He ran from the clutch of the gathering cloud, tumbling in a heap when his foot skidded upon a pile of jeweled armlets. The foremost of the leopards lunged, then jerked back again. The six beasts snarled and spat viciously, still checked by the demoniac presence darkening the great hall. The unearthly shrieking grew to ear-piercing pitch.

Once more the chill billows of the poisonous effluvium of the walls rolled toward him. Brak knew his only escape lay in somehow conquering the hellish demons coming to life all about him. Fighting his way from the hall across the carcasses of the leopards, even though he thought he might be able to do it, would leave that awful presence still stirring behind. Unless he estimated wrongly, he could not even run as far as the outer yard of the palace before the black tendrils closed permanently about him. No, he had to best whatever it was that made the gore-blotched walls whirl and blur like scourged flesh. But how, by the gods, *how?*

HIS mind fled back swiftly to the image of Friar Jerome extending the crucifix. Brak clambered to his feet, throwing back his head and laughing like a madman. Then he fixed a firmer grip upon the jeweled hilt of his sword. He said a silent prayer to his nameless pagan dieties, leaped out and ran headlong into the clutches of the black cloud.

The moment he stepped into the embrace of the foul billows, with that unearthly shrieking noise ringing in his ears, he knew he could not drive himself forward to complete his task. The unseen powers of hatred boiled all around him. They lived in the black poison mist . . . sucking his strength . . . numbing him . . . turning him colder than the earth before its creation. With legs inflamed to a state of pain near ecstasy he staggered on, screaming at the top of his lungs, wild barbaric screams he had learned on the steppes of his birth, the cry of primeval warriors who fought the dark gods at the beginning of known history.

On he stumbled, forcing himself, driving himself while the hell-mists whipped and sucked at him. His brain fogged. His lungs burned. His head was ready to burst. But then, suddenly, he found himself crashing against the chamber wall . . . a

wall no longer solid, but writhing and viscous, *alive* with the crawl and the stench of dead things. Both hands on the haft of the broadsword, he raised the weapon high and brought it arching down, its iron edge hacking a long vertical cut in the inhuman, crawling substance through which it sliced.

As though he had simultaneously struck into the bowels of ten thousand human beings, a cry of agony rose around him. His mouth cracked wide in a ghoulish smile of triumph. The blackish stuff had thinned a little, the flaccid quality had gone out of the wall where his sword-hack glared whitely through the bloodstains. With every throw in his great frame working to capacity, he swung the broadsword over his shoulder and brought it around with all his might. Its savage swing cut a horizontal mark a little more than mid-way up the stem of his first cut. The sign of the cross was whole before him . . .

Brak tottered away, choking and panting from exertion. The black cloud had receded in the area near the cross-mark. Brak turned and plunged along the wall, stopping only to cut another cross.

In this manner he raced around the chamber, driving the demon-cloud before him, until at last it boiled and fumed in a nar-

row area near the chamber entrance.

The tormented wailing rose another notch, to unbelievable heights of excruciating madness. Suddenly Brak noticed the hell-cloud dip and congeal. The six crouching leopards began to scream, tearing at one another with savage clawing leaps. The cloud descended. Brak knew that whatever vile spirits of revenge and hatred had lived in the walls were now seeking refuge in another place. They could not claim him, so they claimed the leopards instead . . .

EVEN as he watched, the beasts became suddenly still. The black cloud had vanished. Then the first of the animals leaped, his great mouth yawning and red, but from it issued not the growl of an animal, but *that same lusty shriek out of the walls . . .*

Brak the barbarian swung his broadsword and lopped off the leopard's head in midair.

Another was coming now, racing through the litter of treasure. Brak plunged his sword into its guts . . .

When finally he stopped, drenched from head to foot with reeking blood, his mouth cracked in a brutal white grin. The last of Hamur's beasts lay twitching in its own gore, and distantly, distantly, a thousand tormented

voices were crying off the depths of the earth, forever slain and vanquished . . .

A grinding sound came to Brak's ears. Even as he swung to seek it, he saw the bloodied walls of Hamur's chamber begin to show cracks and rifts. Dust showered down. Brak had only an instant in which to seek shelter beneath an overturned throne chair before the haunted walls, free at last of their pit-bred inhabitants, crumbled and rocked, tottered and thundered down to destruction, block after mighty block, *crash upon crash upon crash* . . .

When Brak crawled out from beneath the throne chair, wondering that breath still blew in his lungs, the first thing he spied was a block of wall lying nearby . . . a block with the sign of the cross upon it. Awed, he bowed his head a moment. Then he picked his way from the rubble.

The walls had fallen, and the roof. Now clean, sweet air, the mists having dissipated, began to wash the stench from the dread chamber. Brak hunted in the ruins, gathering up as much of the treasure as he could carry in his arms. Then he staggered forth across the drawbridge. Miranda awaited him, her face lighted with greed, no longer beautiful, but drawn into an ugly mask.

Behind her a short distance, unwelcome visitors for Miranda, nearly the entire population of the village had gathered, including Friar Jerome and Yarah the Bull. Miranda threw her arms about Brak's neck. He shook his mighty shoulders, working free of her, and walked on. He dumped the armload of gold and jewelled objects at the feet of the astonished Friar Jerome. Miranda dug her nails savagely into Brak's gore-streaked back. He flung around to face her, crouching warily . . .

"The spoil belongs to me!" Miranda shrieked. "As it belonged to my father. Our bargain . . ."

"The bargain, in your exact words," Brak snarled, "was for me to bring out the treasure, as I have done, after which I would be free. There is part of it." Brak pointed to the wealth strewn on the ground. "With a thousand times that inside, and safe to be taken."

IGNORING her, Brak turned to the Nestorian. "Good father, through your chance intervention I saw the way to slay the demons of the palace that would have claimed my soul. Therefore I give the spoil to you. I have won it. I claim the right of disposal. You take it and buy food for your people in this time of need . . ."

Brak scowled at Miranda. "For though your villagers gawked at me and treated me ill on the slave block, still they're better folk than this creature who would hoard her last coins rather than share them with her less fortunate fellows, who needed them far more than she. *Agh!*" Brak spat on the ground at Miranda's feet. "She trapped herself with the words of her own agreement, and she smells worse of inhumanity than all the accumulated demons of creation."

With a cry of rage Miranda whipped a dagger from her girdle. Brak had no chance to leap aside. Distantly he heard his name called. Miranda's arm swept up, plunged down . . .

And then she toppled over, face down upon the mound of treasure. In her back an arrow quivered. Brak leaped into the crowd, seized a lance carried by one of the citizens and hurled it high. On a ruined battlement of the palace, the slaver Zaldeb arched against the brightening sky, the lance driven with dreadful accuracy through his breastbone and out the other side. Lurching forward, dropping his bow and quiver, Zaldeb pitched over and crashed down into the

dry moat, stirring a cloud of dust.

Brak swiped his forearm across his eyes and scowled at the assembled townsfolk. "I want a place to wash, and a pony to carry me on my road to Khurdisan," he growled. "Are there any among you doubting my freedom to go?"

"By the holies, no!" cried Yarah the Bull, puffing and panting, tumbling from his saddle and stumping forward. "My house is open to you, barbarian. The humble animal on which I ride is yours for the taking." Then, with a covetous glance at the heap of gold, Yarah the Bull rushed forward toward the drawbridge of the palace of Hamur of a Thousand Claws. As if a spell had been lifted, the citizens clamored after him with a jubilant roar. Brak sighed, bent down and caught a fist in Miranda's hair. He pulled her body free of the treasure-pile, saying to Friar Jerome who alone of the others had remained behind, "There is blood enough on it already, I think."

Climbing on the scrawny gray horse of Yarah the Bull, Brak rode slowly down the hillside toward the village.

THE END



the Cloud of Hate

By FRITZ LEIBER

From the Hall of Hate the evil fog

snaked through Lankhmar,

carrying the fetid touch of death

to Fafhrd and the Mouser.

MUFFLED drums beat out a nerve-scratching rhythm and red lights flickered hypnotically in the underground Temple of Hates, where five thousand ragged worshippers knelt and abased themselves and ecstatically pressed foreheads against the cold and gritty cobbles as the trance took hold and the human venom rose in them.

Lankhmar had been at peace for many moons and so the hates were greater. Tonight, furthermore, at a spot halfway across the city, Lankhmar's black-togaed nobility celebrated with merriment and feasting and twinkling dance the betrothal of their Overlord's daughter to the Prince of Ilthmar, and so the hates were redoubled.

The single-halled subterranean

temple was so long and wide and at the same time so irregularly planted with thick pillars that at no point could a person see more than a third of the way across it. Yet it had a ceiling so low that at any point a man standing tall could have brushed it with his fingertips—except that here all grovelled. The air was swooningly fetid. The dark bent backs of the hate-ensorceled worshippers made a kind of hummocky dark ground, from which the nitre-crust stone pillars rose like gray tree trunks.

The masked Archpriest of the Hates lifted a skinny finger. Parchment-thin iron cymbals began to clash in unison with the drums and the furnace-red flickerings, wringing to an unendurable pitch the malices and envies

of the blackly enraptured communicants.

Then in the gloom of that great slit-like hall, dim pale tendrils began to rise from the dark hummocky ground of the bent backs, as though a white, swift-growing ghost-grass had been seeded there. The tendrils, which in another world might have been described as ectoplasmic, quickly multiplied, thickened, lengthened, and then coalesced into questing white serpentine shapes, so that it seemed as if tongues of thick river-fog had come licking down into this sub-cellar from the broad-flowing river Hlal.

THE white serpents coiled past the pillars, brushed the low ceiling, moistly caressed the backs of their devotees and source, and then in turn coalesced to pour up the curving black hole of a narrow spiral stairway, the stone steps of which were worn almost to chutelike smoothness—a sinuously billowing white cylinder in which a redness lurked.

And all the while the drums and cymbals did not falter for a single beat, nor did the eyes of the Archpriest flicker once sideways in their wooden mask, nor did one mesmerized bent soul look up.

Along a misted alley overhead there was hurrying home to the

thieves' quarter a beggar girl, skinny-frail of limb and with eyes big as a lemur's peering fearfully from a tiny face of elfin beauty. She saw the white pillar, slug-flat now, pouring out between the bars of a window-slit level with the pavement, and although there were thick chilly tendrils of river-fog already following her, she knew that this was different.

She tried to run around the thing, but swift almost as a serpent striking, it whipped across to the opposite wall, barring her way. She ran back, but it outraced her and made a U, penning her against the unyielding wall. Then she only stood still and shook as the fog-serpent narrowed and grew denser and came wreathing around her. Its tip swayed like the head of a poisonous snake preparing to strike and then suddenly dipped toward her breast. She stopped shaking then and her head fell back and the pupils rolled up in her lemur-like eyes so that they showed only great whites, and she dropped to the pavement limp as a rag.

The fog-serpent nosed at her for a few moments, then as though irked at finding no life remaining, flipped her over on her face, and went swiftly questing in the same direction the river-fog itself was taking: across city toward the homes of



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the nobles and the lantern-jeweled palace of the Overlord.

Save for an occasional fleeting red glint in the one, the two sorts of fog were identical.

BESIDE a dry stone horse-trough at the juncture of five alleys, two men curled close to either side of a squat brazier in which a little charcoal glowed. The spot was so near the quarter of the nobles that the sounds of music and laughter came at intervals, faintly, along with a dim rainbow-glow of light. The two men might have been a hulking beggar and a small one, except that their tunics and leggings and cloaks, though threadbare, were of good stuff, and scabbarded weapons lay close to the hand of each.

The larger said, "There'll be fog tonight. I smell it coming from the Hlal." This was Fafhrd, brawny-armed, pale and serene of face, reddish gold of hair.

For reply the smaller shivered and fed the brazier two small gobbets of charcoal and said sardonically, "Next predict glaciers!—advancing down the Street of the Gods, by preference." That was the Mouser, eyes wary, lips quirking, cheeks muffled by gray hood drawn close.

Fafhrd grinned. As a tinkling gust of distant song came by, he asked the dark air that carried it, "Now why aren't we warmly

cushioned somewhere inside tonight, well drunk and sweetly embraced?"

For answer the Gray Mouser drew from his belt a rat-skin pouch and slapped it by its drawstrings against his palm. It flattened as it hit and nothing chinked. For good measure he writhed at Fafhrd the backs of his ten fingers, all ringless.

Fafhrd grinned again and said to the dusky space around them, which was now filled with the finest mist, the fog's forerunner, "Now that's a strange thing. We've won I know not how many jewels and oddments of gold and electrum in our adventurings—and even letters of credit on the Guild of the Grain Merchants. Where have they all flown to?—the credit-letters on parchment wings, the jewels jetting fire like tiny red and green and pearly cuttlefish. Why aren't we rich?"

The Mouser snorted, "Because you dribble away our get on worthless drabs, or oftener still pour it out for some noble whim—some plot of bogus angels to storm the walls of Hell. Meantime I stay poor nursemaid-ing you."

Fafhrd laughed and retorted, "You overlook your own whimsical imprudences, such as slitting the Overlord's purse and picking his pocket too the selfsame night you rescued and returned him his lost crown. No, Mouser, I

think we're poor because—" Suddenly he lifted on an elbow and flared his nostrils as he snuffed the chill moist air. "There's a taint in the fog tonight," he announced.

The Mouser said dryly, "I already smell dead fish, burnt fat, horse dung, tickly lint, Lankhmar sausage gone stale, cheap temple incense burnt by the ten-pound cake, rancid oil, moldy grain, slaves' barracks, embalmers' tanks crowded to the black brim, and the stink of a cathedral full of unwashed carters and trulls celebrating orgiastic rites—and now you tell me of a taint!"

"It is something different from all those," Fafhrd said, peering successively down the five alleys. "Perhaps the last . . ." His voice trailed off doubtfully and he shrugged.

STRANDS of fog came questing through small high-set street-level windows into the tavern called the Rats' Nest, interlacing curiously with the soot-trail from a failing torch, but unnoticed except by an old harlot who pulled her patchy fur cloak closer at her throat.

All eyes were on the wrist game being played across an ancient oaken table by the famed bravo Gnarlag and a dark-skinned mercenary almost as big-thewed as he. Right elbows

firmly planted and right hands bone-squeezingly gripped, each strained to force the back of the other's wrist down against the ringed and scarred and carved and knife-stuck wood. Gnarlag, who scowled sneeringly, had the advantage by a thumb's length.

One of the fog-strands, as though itself a devotee of the wrist game and curious about the bout, drifted over Gnarlag's shoulder. To the old harlot the inquisitive fog-strand looked redly-veined—a reflection from the torches, no doubt, but she prayed it brought fresh blood to Gnarlag.

The fog finger touched the taut arm. Gnarlag's sneering look turned to one of pure hate and the muscles of his forearm seemed to double in thickness as he rotated it more than a half turn. There was a muffled snap and a gasp of anguish. The mercenary's wrist had been broken.

Gnarlag stood up. He knocked to the wall a wine cup offered him and cuffed aside a girl who would have embraced him. Then grabbing up his two swords on their thick belt from the bench beside him, he strode to the brick stairs and up out of the Rats' Nest. By some trick of air currents, perhaps, it seemed that a fog-strand rested across his shoulders like a comradely arm.

When he was gone, someone said, "Gnarlag was ever a cold

and ungrateful winner." The dark mercenary stared at his dangling hand and bit back groans.

SO TELL me, giant philosopher, why we're not dukes," the Gray Mouser demanded, unrolling a forefinger from the fist on his knee so that it pointed across the brazier at Fafhrd. "Or emperors, for that matter, or demigods."

"We are not dukes because we're no man's man," Fafhrd replied smugly, settling his shoulders against the stone horse-trough. "Even a duke must butter up a king, and demigods the gods. We butter no one. We go our own way, choosing our own adventures—and our own follies! Better freedom and a chilly road than a warm hearth and servitude."

"There speaks the hound turned out by his last master and not yet found new boots to slaver on," the Mouser retorted with comradely sardonic impudence. "Look you, you noble liar, we've labored for a dozen lords and kings and merchants fat. You've served Movarl across the Inner Sea. I've served the bandit Pulg. We've both served this Gliplerio, whose girl is tied to Ilthmar this same night."

"Those are all exceptions," Fafhrd protested grandly. "And even when we serve, we make the

rules. We bow to no man's ultimate command, dance to no wizard's drumming, join no mob, hark to no wildering hate-call. When we draw sword, it's for ourselves alone. *What's that?*"

He had lifted his sword for emphasis, gripping it by the scabbard just below the guard, but now he held it still with the hilt near his ear.

"It hums a warning!" he said tersely after a moment. "The steel twangs softly in its sheath!"

Chuckling tolerantly at this show of superstition, the Mouser drew his slimmer sword from its light scabbard, sighted along the blade's oiled length at the red embers, spotted a couple of dark flecks and began to rub at them with a rag.

When nothing more happened, Fafhrd said grudgingly as he laid down his undrawn sword, "Perchance only a dragon walked across the cave where the blade was forged. Still, I don't like this tainted mist."

GIS the cutthroat and the courtesan Tres had watched the fog coming across the fantastically peaked roofs of Lankhmar until it obscured the low-swinging yellow crescent of the moon and the rainbow glow from the palace. Then they had lit the cressets and drawn the blue drapes and were playing at

throw-knife to sharpen their appetites for a more intimate but hardly kinder game.

Tres was not unskillful, but Gis could somersault the weapon a dozen or thirteen times before it stuck in wood, and throw as truly between his legs as back over his shoulder without mirror. Whenever he threw the knife so it struck very near Tres, he smiled. She had to remind herself that he was not much more evil than most evil men.

A frond of fog came wreathing between the blue drapes and touched Gis on the temple as he prepared to throw. "The blood in the fog's in your eye-whites!" Tres cried, staring at him weirdly. He seized the girl by the ear and, smiling hugely, slashed her neck just below his knuckles. Then, dancing out of the way of the gushing blood, he delicately snatched up his belt of daggers and darted down the curving stairs to the street, where he plunged into a warm-hearted fog that was somehow as full of rage as the strong wine of Tovilyis is of sugar, a veritable cistern of wrath. His whole being was bathed in sensations as ecstatic as those strong but fleeting ones the tendril's touch on his temple had loosed from his brain. Visions of daggered princesses and skewered serving maids danced in his head. He stepped along happily, agog with delicious an-

ticipations, beside Gnarlag of the Two Swords, knowing him at once for a hate-brother, sacrosanct, another slave of the blessed fog.

* * *

Fafhrd cupped his big hands over the brazier and whistled the gay tune sifting from the remotely twinkling palace. The Mouser, now re-oiling the blade of Scalpel against the mist, observed, "For one beset by taints and danger-hums, you're very jolly."

"I like it here," the northerner asserted. "A fig for courts and beds and inside fires! The edge of life is keener in the street—as on the mountaintop. Is not imagined wine sweeter than wine?" ("Ho!" the Mouser laughed, most sardonically.) "And is not a crust of bread tastier to one an-hungered than larks' tongues to an epicure? Adversity makes the keenest appetite, the clearest vision."

"There spoke the ape who could not reach the apple," the Mouser told him. "If a door to paradise opened in that wall there, you'd dive through."

"Only because I've never been to paradise," Fafhrd swept on. "Is it not sweeter now to hear the music of Innesgay's betrothal from afar than mingle with the feasters, jig with them, be cramped and blinkered by their social rituals?"

"There's many a one in Lankhmar gnawn fleshless with envy by those sounds tonight," the Mouser said darkly. "I am not gnawn so much as those stupid ones. I am more intelligently jealous. Still, the answer to your question: no!"

"Sweeter by far tonight to be Glipkerio's watchman than his pampered guest," Fafhrd insisted, caught up by his own poetry and hardly hearing the Mouser.

"You mean we serve Glipkerio *free*?" the latter demanded loudly. "Aye, there's the bitter core of all freedom: no pay!"

Fafhrd laughed, came to himself, and said almost abashedly, "Still, there is something in the keenness and the watchman part. We're watchmen not for pay, but solely for the watching's sake! Indoors and warm and comforted, a man is blind. Out here we see the city and the stars, we hear the rustle and the tramp of life, we crouch like hunters in a stony blind, straining our senses for—"

"Please, Fafhrd, no more danger signs," the Mouser protested. "Next you'll be telling me there's a monster a-drool and a-stalk in the streets, all slaving for Innesgay and her betrothal-maids, no doubt. And perchance a sword-garnished princeling or two, for appetizer."

Fafhrd gazed at him soberly and said, peering around through

the thickening mist, "When I am *quite* sure of that, I'll let you know."

THE twin brothers Kreshmar and Skel, assassins and alley-bashers by trade, were menacing a miser in his hovel when the red-veined fog came in after them. As swiftly as ambitious men take last bite and wine-swig at a family dinner when unexpectedly summoned to the emperor's banquet board, the two finished their business. Kreshmar neatly bludgeoned a crater in the miser's skull while Skel thrust into his belt the one small purse of gold they had thus far extorted from the ancient man now turning to corpse. They stepped briskly outside, their swords a-swing at their hips, and into the fog, where they marched side-by-side with Gnarlag and Gis in the midst of the compact pale mass that moved almost indistinguishably with the river fog and yet intoxicated them as surely as if it were a clouded white wine of murder and destruction, zestfully sluicing away all natural cautions and fears, promising an infinitude of thrilling and most profitable victims.

Behind the four marchers, the false fog thinned to a single glimmering thread, red as an artery, silver as a nerve, that led back unbroken around many a stony corner to the Temple of the

Hates. A pulsing went ceaselessly along the thread, as nourishment and purpose were carried from the Temple to the marauding fog mass and to the four killers, now doubly hate-enslaved, marching along with it. The fog mass moved purposefully as a snow tiger toward the quarter of the nobles and Glipkerio's rainbow-lanterned palace above the break-water of the Inner Sea.

Three black-clad police of Lankhmar, armed with metal-capped cudgels and weighted wickedly-barbed darts, saw the thicker fog mass coming and the marchers in it. The impression to them was of four men frozen in a sort of pliant ice. Their flesh crawled. They felt paralyzed. The fog fingered them, but almost instantly passed them by as inferior material for its purpose.

Knives and swords licked out of the fog mass. With never a cry the three police fell, their black tunics glistening with a fluid that showed red only on their sallow slack limbs. The fog mass thickened, as if it had fed instantly and richly on its victims. The four marchers became almost invisible from the outside, though from the inside they saw clearly enough.

FAR down the longest and most landward of the five alleyways, the Mouser saw by the palace-glimmer behind him the white

mass coming, shooting questing tendrils before it, and cried gayly, "Look, Fafhrd, we've company! The fog comes all the twisty way from the Hlal to war its paddy paws at our little fire."

Fafhrd, frowning his eyes, said mistrustfully, "I think it masks other guests."

"Don't be a scareling," the Mouser reproved him in a fey voice. "I've a droll thought, Fafhrd: what if it be not fog, but the smoke of all the poppy-gum and hemp-resin in Lankhmar burning at once? What joys we'll have once we are sniffing it! What dreams we'll have to-night!"

"I think it brings nightmares," Fafhrd asserted softly, rising in a half crouch. Then, "Mouser, the taint! And my sword tingles to the touch!"

The questingmost of the swiftly-advancing fog tendrils fingered them both then and seized on them joyously, as if here were the two captains it had been seeking, the slave-leadership which would render it invincible.

The two blood-brothers tall and small felt to the full then the intoxication of the fog, its surging bittersweet touch-song of hate, its hot promises of all blood-lusts forever fulfilled, an uninhibited eternity of murder-madness.

Fafhrd, wineless tonight, intoxicated only by his own ideal-

isms and the thought of watchmanship, was hardly touched by the sensations, did not feel them as temptations at all.

The Mouser, much of whose nature was built on hates and envies, had a harder time, but he too in the end rejected the fog's masterful lures—if only, to put the worst interpretation on it, because he wanted always to be the source of his own evil and would never accept it from another, not even as a gift from the archfiend himself.

The fog shrank back a dozen paces then, cat-quick, like a vixenishly proud woman rebuffed, revealing the four marchers in it and simultaneously pointing tendrils straight at the Mouser and Fafhrd.

IT was well for the Mouser then that he knew the membership of Lankhmar's underworld to the last semiprofessional murderer and that his intuitions and reflexes were both arrow-swift. He recognized the smallest of the four—Gis with his belt of knives—as also the most immediately dangerous. Without hesitation he whipped Cat's-claw from its sheath, poised, aimed, and threw equally knowledgeable and swift of thought and speedy of reaction, hurled one of his knives.

But the Mouser, forever cautious and wisely fearful, snatched his head to one side the

moment he'd made his throw, so that Gis's knife only sliced his ear flap as it hummed past.

Gis, trusting too supremely in his own speed, made no similar evasive movement—with the result that the hilt of Cat's-claw stood out from his right eye-socket an instant later. For a long moment he peered with shock and surprise from his other eye, then slumped to the cobbles, his features contorted in the ultimate agony.

Kreshmar and Skel swiftly drew their swords and Gnarlag his two, not one whit intimidated by the winged death that had bitten into their comrade's brain.

Fafhrd, with a fine feeling for tactics on a broad front, did not draw sword at first but snatched up the brazier by one of its three burningly hot short legs and whirled its meager red-glowing contents in the attackers' faces.

This stopped them long enough for the Mouser to draw Scalpel and Fafhrd his heavier cave-forged sword. He wished he could do without the brazier—it was much too hot, but seeing himself opposed to Gnarlag of the Two Swords, he contented himself with shifting it jugglingly to his left hand.

Thereafter the fight was one swift sudden crisis. The three attackers, daunted only a moment by the spray of hot coals and quite uninjured by them,

raced forward surefootedly. Four truly-aimed blades thrust at the Mouser and Fafhrd.

The northerner parried Gnarlak's righthand sword with the brazier and his lefthand sword with the guard of his own weapon, which he managed simultaneously to thrust through the bravo's neck.

The shock of that death-stroke was so great that Gnarlak's two swords, bypassing Fafhrd one to each side, made no second stroke in their wielder's death-spasm. Fafhrd, conscious now chiefly of an agonizing pain in his left hand, chucked the brazier away in the nearest useful direction—which happened to be at Skel's head, spoiling that one's thrust at the Mouser, who was skipping nimbly back at the moment, though not more swiftly than Kreshmar and Skel were attacking.

The Mouser ducked under Kreshmar's blade and thrust Scalpel *up* through the assassin's ribs—the easy way to the heart—then quickly whipped it out and gave the same measured dose of thin steel to the dazedly staggering Skel. Then he danced away, looking around him dartingly and holding his sword high and menacing.

"All down and dead," Fafhrd, who'd had longer to look, assured him. "Ow, Mouser, I've burnt my fingers!"

"And I've a dissected ear," that one reported, exploring cautiously with little pats. He grinned. "Just at the edge though." Then, having digested Fafhrd's remark, "Serve you right for fighting with a kitchen boy's weapon!"

Fafhrd retorted, "Bah! If you weren't such a miser with the charcoal, I'd have blinded them all with my ember-cast!"

"And burnt your fingers even worse," the Mouser countered pleasantly. Then, still more happy-voiced, "Methought I heard gold chink at the belt of the one you brazier-bashed. Skel . . . yes, alley-basher Skel. When I've recovered Cat's-claw—"

HE broke off because of an ugly little sucking sound that ended in a tiny *plop*. In the hazy glow from the nobles' quarter they saw an horridly supernatural sight: the Mouser's bloody dagger poised above Gis's punctured eye-socket, supported only by a coiling white tentacle of the fog which had masked their attackers and which had now grown still more dense, as if it had sucked supreme nutriment—as indeed it had—from its dead servitors in their dying.

All around was a faint clattering of steel against cobble: other fog tentacles were lifting the four dropped swords and Gis's knife, while yet others were

groping at that dead cutthroat's belt for his undrawn weapons.

It was as if some great ghost squid from the depths of the Inner Sea were arming itself for combat.

And four yards above the ground, at the rooting point of the tentacles in the thickened fog, a red disk was forming in the center of the fog's body, as it were—a reddish disk that looked moment by moment more like a single eye large as a face.

There was the inescapable thought that as soon as that eye could see, some ten beweaponed tentacles would thrust or slash at once, unerringly.

Fafhrd stood between the swiftly-forming eye and the Mouser. The latter, suddenly inspired, gripped Scalpel firmly, readied himself for a dash, and cried to the tall northerner, "Make a stirrup!"

Guessing the Mouser's stratagem, Fafhrd laced his fingers together and went into a half crouch. The Mouser raced forward and planted his right foot in the stirrup Fafhrd had made of his hands and kicked off from it just as the latter helped his jump with a great heave—and a simultaneous "Ow!" of extreme pain.

The Mouser, preceded by his exactly aimed sword, went straight through the reddish ectoplasmic eye-disk, dispersing

it entirely. Then he vanished from Fafhrd's view as suddenly and completely as if he had been swallowed up by a snowbank.

An instant later the armed tentacles began to thrust and slash about, at random and erratically, as blind swordsmen might. But since there were a full ten of them, some of the strokes came perilously close to Fafhrd and he had to dodge and duck to keep out of the way. At the rutch of his shoes on the cobbles the tentacle-wielded swords and knives began to aim themselves a little better, again as blind swordsmen might, and he had to dodge more nimbly—not the easiest or safest work for a man so big. A dispassionate observer, if such had been conceivable and available, might have decided the ghost squid was trying to make Fafhrd dance.

MEANWHILE on the other side of the white monster, the Mouser had caught sight of the pinkish silver thread and, leaping high as it lifted to evade him, slashed it with the tip of Scalpel. It offered more resistance to his sword than the whole fog-body had and parted with a most unnatural and unexpected *twang* as he cut it through.

Immediately the fog body collapsed and far more swiftly than any punctured bladder—rather it fell apart like a giant white

puffball kicked by a giant boot—and the tentacles fell to pieces too and the swords and knives came clattering down harmlessly on the cobbles and there was a swift fleeting rush of stench that made both Fafhrd and the Mouser clap hand to nose and mouth.

After sniffing cautiously and finding the air breathable again, the Mouser called brightly, "Hola there, dear comrade! I think I cut the thing's thin throat, or heart string, or vital nerve, or silver tether, or birth cord, or whatever the strand was."

"Where did the strand lead back to?" Fafhrd demanded.

"I have no intention of trying to find that out," the Mouser assured him, gazing warily over his shoulder in the direction from which the fog had come. "You try threading the Lankhmar labyrinth if you want to. But the strand seems as gone as the thing."

"Ow!" Fafhrd cried out suddenly and began to flap his hands. "Oh you small villain, to trick me into making a stirrup of my burnt hands!"

The Mouser grinned as he poked about with his gaze at the nastily slimed cobbles and the dead bodies and the scattered hardware. "Cat's-claw must be here somewhere," he muttered, "and I did hear the chink of gold . . ."

"You'd feel a penny under the tongue of a man you were strangling!" Fafhrd told him angrily.

* * *

At the Temple of the Hates, five thousand worshippers began to rise up weakly and groaningly, each lighter of weight by some few ounces than when he had first bowed down. The drummers slumped over their drums, the lantern-crankers over their extinguished red candles, and the lank archpriest wearily and grimly lowered his head and rested the wooden mask in his clawlike hands.

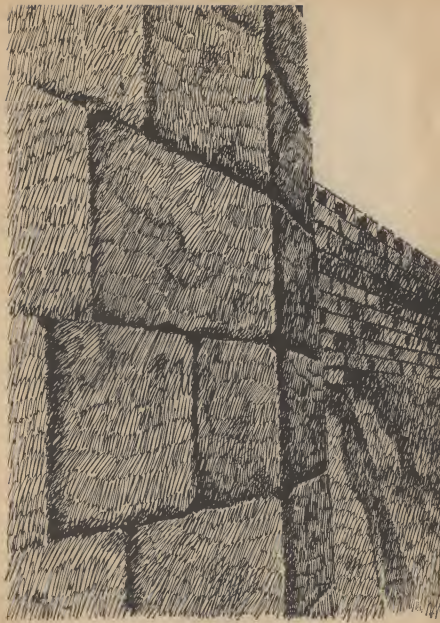
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At the alley-juncture the Mouser dangled before Fafhrd's face the small purse he had just slipped from Skel's belt.

"My noble comrade, shall we make a betrothal gift of it to sweet Innesgay?" he asked liltily. "And rekindle the dear little brazier and end this night as we began it, savoring all the matchless joys of watchmanship and all the manifold wonders of—"

"Give't here, idiot boy!" Fafhrd snarled, snatching the chinking thing for all his burnt fingers. "I know a place where they've soothing salves—and needles too, to stitch up the notched ears of thieves—and where both the wine and the girls are sharp and clean!"

THE END



THE MESSAGE

By EDWARD WELLEN

*Painfully, step by step, the jade man climbed to power
in a strange society. How could he know his grandiose
plans would crumble because a lover took a short-cut?*

AGAIN Old Kung swung his ax. Again the blade struck true. Again he felt the shock run up his arm, saw the gash grow,

heard the chip fall, smelled the blood of the pine, tasted the salt of his sweat. He stopped to rest for a moment.



Illustrator
SCHELLING

Chieh-chieh, an oriole was singing. *Yao-yao*, the insects sang, as they had sung in the pine since the beginning. Old Kung wished he could make a song. The breeze of his ax and his grunt and its bite were his song. He had seen no nest in this tree but he looked in it for the oriole, sighed, turned once more to the swinging of his ax.

He stopped the swing short. Shock ran down his arm. The ax trembled. A man stood there and Old Kung would have cut him in two at the loins.

Old Kung had heard no sound but bird song and insect song, so how the man came to be there, within swing of his ax, he could not tell. The man seemed not to know how near he had come to the nine yellow springs. He seemed too far gone in surprise at what he was seeing of this living world to know he had been close to the world of the grave. Old Kung too stared in surprise. The man wore no clothes.

His skin had the tinge of jade. Old Kung did not have to point out to the man that he stood bare. The man began to shiver. He looked at Old Kung with wild eyes, as though some grief or rage or fear or all three boiled within him. Old Kung knew by sight if not by name most of the people living this side of the mountain. This man he knew neither by name or by sight. The

man came from some village in some other valley. This was some poor madman who had broken loose from his kin and wandered far and lost. Though how he had come such a way through brambles with not a scratch— But the gods watched over madmen. Old Kung kept good grip on his ax and spoke kindly.

"Are you well, my son?"

The man tilted his head as if better to hold in his ear the sounds Old Kung made. He frowned, shook his head, made strange sounds of his own.

Old Kung kept even tighter grip on his ax. This one might be worse than a madman, this one might be a demon of the north, one of the Hsiung-nu— though those, as all knew, had horns. No, this was a man, though without the hue of a man. But that could come of the cold or from a ferment of his juices.

"Are you cold, my son? Have you eaten? Would you honor me by sharing my poor fire and food? Come."

And smiling he rested the broad of his ax on his shoulder and beckoning he set out, looking back to see that the man followed.

OLD KUNG lived in a cave while he cut wood and till he should go down with his load to the village. With wonder the stranger watched Old Kung

strike fire. With wonder he drank broth of the *li* plant and ate bread of unhusked kernels of millet. He took without question Old Kung's offer of his own place on the stove bed; this was the crude *k'ang* Old Kung had made by scooping out the side of the cave and digging an opening underneath in which a fire glowed all night. And by that light Old Kung saw whenever he looked, and he wakened often in the cold, the shining of the stranger's eyes.

In the morning, though it meant chill for himself till he should warm himself at his work and then the worse chill when he should leave off work, Old Kung shared his rags with the stranger. After the morning meal Old Kung lifted his ax and set out for the cutting. The stranger followed, clumsy on rag-bound feet.

His hot eyes, restless as a shepherd's, watched Old Kung at work. And when Old Kung stopped to rest the stranger reached out for the ax. Old Kung let him take it. The stranger looked at the iron and felt it and smiled. Then he learned its balance and swung at the tree savagely till his palms blistered and the blisters broke. But he had not spent his fury; he threw the ax to the earth and stalked into the woods.

After a moment Old Kung

took up the ax, wiped it, and went to work. In between the song of his ax he heard *chieh-chieh* and *yao-yao* and the stranger walking about, but never far, in the woods. The stranger came back when Old Kung was ready to return to the cave and followed him there.

He remained eight moons with Old Kung, in the cave and in the hut in the village, from the time when ants burrow to the time when the mantis begins to feed. He helped Old Kung chop and split and haul though it was clear this was not work to his liking. He did not lose his caged fury but learned to cover the cage. And at the last he was no longer a man of jade, for as the days wore on his skin took on the hue of a true man. At first Old Kung thought the man smelled of walnut, so that one might think the man had stained himself with the juice, but as he never saw the man at this, Old Kung put the thought away. Too, the man was older than he had seemed; beardless at his coming, he grew mustache and beard like a man well on in years, a man past thirty.

But though he looked to be over the illness of his body in days, it took moons to bring him back to a whole mind. He did not suck mother's milk but in all other things he was as a child. Old Kung had to teach him what a

child came into the world knowing—the names of things. He learned fast, pointing, touching, handling. He learned greedily, showing anger such times as Old Kung, not knowing a thing, stuck fast. "That I do not know, my son." Old Kung would sense the baffled fury.

THIS came more often toward the end of the stranger's stay, for he showed himself more and more eager to learn the ways of the great world. Why he should want to fill his head with such things passed Old Kung's understanding.

"I am not a sage but I have seen many things and have heard more. I will tell you what I can, my son."

Times Old Kung found this wearying, the stranger sucking his brain dry, as though it were an egg. Other times Old Kung found this quickening, learning himself how much more he knew than he knew he knew. Who could tell—maybe he had it in him to make a song.

"*Ai!* Wei state builds a wall against Ch'in and Han, Ch'i builds a wall against Lu, Yen builds a wall against the Hsiung-nu and Ch'i, Chao builds a wall against Wei. *Ai!* The strong grind down the weak. Seven states make up the Middle Kingdom, and of these the greatest is Ch'in. But in the state of

Ch'in the young and strong eat the best food, the old and weak eat the leavings. In Ch'in they prize the young and strong and scorn the old and weak. What would the Master say?" He had told the stranger what he knew of the teachings of K'ung Futzu and the stranger now nodded thoughtfully. This pleased Old Kung. "*Ai!* Life is hard here in Wei, but it is not as it is in Ch'in."

One day Old Kung gave the stranger a name. At first he had a mind to call the man Lu in token of the stranger's hue at his coming. But Old Kung saw the man waiting with hot eyes and strange smile for him to say a name. So he did not speak the word but blew his nose with his fingers and thought again. "I will call you 'Who.'" And so the name of the man was Shu.

It was a bad year, living was lean. Shu would have to make his own way in the world, learn cowries were needful.

"Why not take up the carrying of wood? I do not say you are not fit for better, my son. But as you do not seem to recall what that may be and as I do not know and since we must take things as we find them in this world, why not become a wood carrier?"

And so Shu, while he still stayed with Old Kung, carried wood. And when there were oth-

er loads he carried these other burdens hanging by ropes from the ends of his bamboo shoulder pole. But it was clear he had not come into the world to do such work. At the end of one long day, resting outdoors with Old Kung, he sat bent watching a line of ants hurrying to their mound.

"How may a wood carrier become a wearer of the brocaded robe of an official?"

This frightened Old Kung. "Does the swallow know the way of the wild goose?" But he tried to answer. "For that you need much learning. You must know how to make signs with a bamboo brush on bamboo slips."

Shu straightened as if all weariness had fled. But he said no more and for this Old Kung was glad. But it seemed that from this time Shu in his mind had done with Old Kung and the other villagers who befriended him. Shu on his bed of straw and awake seemed to dream himself a butterfly mingling with caterpillars.

ONE day he asked, "What is that building one *li* beyond the village? Why do we never carry wood there?"

Old Kung smiled wanly. "I would not tell you what goes on there."

"I would know."

"That is an inn. But a black inn."

"Inn I know. But black inn?"

"A den of robbers who prey on travelers. Let us think of it no more."

The following day Shu made for the inn with a load of wood. He stopped to rest at the bend of the rapid mountain stream where a whirlpool spun light from a cocoon of darkness. This whirlpool had now and again given up the broken body of a careless traveler. Shu looked upstream where it foamed through the narrows past the inn, and he smiled.

The innkeeper looked at Shu, at his load, heard his price, nodded to another to swing the gate wide. So it began, and it did not take long for Shu to prove himself of use to those at the inn. He learned to share the mirth of the company, even to making his eyes laugh.

And so at the end of the eight moons Shu left Old Kung's roof and became one of the band at the black inn.

All this Old Kung saw sadly. He longed to warn Shu. Beware—tiger and deer do not stroll together. But Old Kung read Shu's eyes and made himself blind and dumb. He did not see Shu again save from far off. He did not know it grew hard to say which the deer, which the tiger.

* * *

The scholar Li Ssu and his

manservant halted at the inn. Its untrimmed reed thatch looked uninviting but it would soon be dusk and inside was warm welcome. A fire going—beanstalks crackling under a bubbling pot of beans—and bowing innkeeper and willing-looking maidservants. So Li Ssu did not let the unsmoothed oak roof-beams and the eating from earthen bowl and drinking from earthen vase stay him from putting up for the night.

But when it came time to dress and eat, pay and go, Li Ssu found his servant did not rush to answer his call. It seemed servant had made off in the night with all the belongings of master.

The innkeeper, deaf to talk of sending back, gave way to a man Li Ssu's age, a man calling himself Shu. Shu looked sad for Li Ssu and understanding.

"There is a way for you to earn what you owe and more."

Li Ssu glanced at encircling faces, eyed Shu. "I know Ching from Wei. This place stinks of Ching." He laughed at Shu's face. "Understand. Rivers Ching and Wei conflow. Ching is muddy, Wei clear. To tell Ching from Wei means to tell impure from pure." He waved that aside. "What is this way?"

"Teach me to make signs with a bamboo brush on bamboo slips."

Li Ssu sat down. He leaned back and looked at Shu from under drooping eyelids. He did not think it wise to laugh. But one lesson should show the man his place. "Bring writing materials."

He looked sharply at what they laid before him. He was sorry he had not thought to put his name on his missing belongings. The brush winged. "This is your name."

Shu took brush and slip, quickly drew the sign. Li Ssu looked at the sign, then at the man Shu, then wrote a thornier sign, spoke its name. Shu, without looking again at the sign, set it down in turn, said the name. Li Ssu knew the man would never forget sign or name. He sighed to see he could not frighten the man out of it.

SO Li Ssu stayed to teach the ten thousand signs. When things are as they should be, then the dragon flies in the sky. But when things go against him, then he must hide in the mud, holding back, awaiting his hour. Too, it would be interesting to watch the man Shu and see how far he could overcome years of brute living.

Shu's quickness to learn astonished Li Ssu, gave him a thing to think on such times as he was not teaching or drinking. Such times were few, for Shu

kept his brush flying and a laughing fat girl kept his wine flowing. But such times Li Ssu gave Shu a look of anger; though he knew it was otherwise, he would feel sure Shu was a scholar mocking him by making out to learn with scornful ease what he knew already.

From somewhere appeared volumes—joinings of many bamboo slips, each slip with its line of writing—and Shu was reading and transcribing without prompting the sayings of the Master, and those of Li Ssu's own master, Hsun K'uang. Four moons had passed and Li Ssu was saying, while the girl refilled his vase, "Now you have my learning, may it serve you better than it has served me." Li Ssu mocked himself, mocking Shu also. "What will you do with it? One man counts for nothing."

But Shu said without smiling, "The linchpin, though but a *ts'un* long, masters the whole wheel."

"True, O pupil of my eye. But will a Li Ssu become a linchpin? I know I am drunk. But I like my tongue loose. I am bitter and it does me good to spit out the taste." His mien that of worn pride, he told again how he had been a government clerk in his native Ch'u, bending his back to serve the mighty and burning to rise high, told again how he had

sat at the feet of the sage Hsun Tzu and studied the doings of leaders and learned of the need to tame and rule Nature. "Now a team of four draws a carriage in which my fellow pupil Han Fei rides, for Han Fei though tongue-tied is of the House of Han. But Li Ssu rides a donkey—or rode one till the night his man vanished—and hopes the letters he carries—or carried till the night his man vanished—will lead a high personage to make him a guest of the payroll.

"An end to this. You will pay me and I will go and when I reach Ch'in I will send back to Ch'u for new letters." Foreseeing that he would have to kowtow to vanity, to wealth, to self-seeking scholarship, he fell into moody silence, roused. "Lu Pu-wei? Now you speak of a linchpin of linchpins.

"Lu Pu-wei comes from Wei or Han—I forget which. He began as a peddler, became a great merchant. He dealt in anything—grains, ox hair, jades, fish, salt, lacquer, silks, ginger, cinnamon, gold, copper, cinnabar, rhinoceros horn, tortoise shell, pearls, hides, horses, cattle, sheep; you can see I deal in words."

The girl steadied his hand to refill the vase.

"Living as a merchant in Chao, Lu Pu-wei grew friendly with I Jen, a by-blow of the

House of Ying. I Jen, one of the many easy-to-spare bastard princes of Ch'in, lived as a hostage in Chao, and so not at all high."

"As the Master says, 'Even the emperor has straw-sandaled relatives.'"

I HAVE taught you well. Poor I Jen. But I Jen had a good friend in Lu Pu-wei. I will tell you how good a friend Lu Pu-wei was to I Jen. One evening the good host Lu Pu-wei called for a dancer. His guest I Jen turned languidly to watch the girl. Her long sleeves and pointed dancing shoes all seemed to dance in air. I Jen's fixed gaze and fallen chin acknowledged her pliant form, her eyebrows that were compass arcs, her nose that was the crescent of the Hun. I Jen's face grew more flushed and the veins of his temple swelled and he belched his admiration like a man. Now, Lu Pu-wei had taken this dancer as a concubine. But when he saw the girl pleased I Jen he gave her to his friend. And it was true largesse, the girl, thanks to Lu Pu-wei, being with child.

"This was not all Lu Pu-wei did for his friend I Jen. Lu Pu-wei went on business to Ch'in. Shortly, the principle wife of Crown Prince Hsiao Wen Wang adopted I Jen. Who is proof against gold? Or let us say she

listened to reasoning that, being childless, she would have to give way to a concubine who could bear her husband an heir.

"So I Jen became that heir. And time passed, and three years ago Chao Hsiang Wang, who ruled over Ch'in for fifty-two years and seemed strong for fifty-two more, died, and Hsiao Wen Wang succeeded him, ruled three days, died, and none other than I Jen succeeded to the scarcely warm throne. And so now I Jen is Chuang Hsiang Wang, ruler of Ch'in, and the dancer, Chichik, is his queen, and the next in line is Cheng, a boy of some twelve years (I have heard that looking at him you would see the nose of the dancer islanded in the broad face of Lu Pu-wei), and Lu Pu-wei is prime minister.

"And Lu Pu-wei has a household great as the king's and, by levying on the hundred thousand families living and working on his estate at Loyang and by collecting a minister's salary of ten thousand bushels of rice a year and by virtue of his other virtues, keeps three thousand scholars as guests on the payroll—and could surely take on one more poor scholar. I have heard that a thousand gold pieces hang at his house gates for anyone wise enough to better, by adding or striking one word, a work Lu Pu-wei himself has written. I do

not have to hear that it would not be wise to succeed." Li Ssu laughed. "But right here at this inn I have seen looks passing, heard whisperings; I can tell even here you have your palace intrigues." He was suddenly not drunk. "How did we come to speak of Lu Pu-wei? Now I think on it, I do not remember being first to bring up his name."

"You think on it too late."

The body came to a stillness among rushes. A boatman sculled near, took off his palm-bark cape, leaned over the side and reached into the water. The body was in the tatters of the clothing of Shu and so they knew it was not that of some careless traveler. Old Kung grieved for the strange wayfarer who had sojourned among them for so short a while. And so at the crossing of the year a Shu came to an end and a Li Ssu took up the journey.

* * *

WITH the defiant humility of a boy of thirteen years Prince Cheng showed his brushwork to Li Ssu, ornament of Lu Pu-wei's service. He waited Li Ssu's word with the acquiescent pride of the coming ruler of Ch'in.

Li Ssu was neither hasty or hesitant. "Here it is just, here wrangling, here testifies to your highness' boldness of attack." He

took up brush and slip. "May I counsel your highness to keep trying his hand at strong straight strokes, this way."

Prince Cheng looked idly at the sign Li Ssu's brush had seemingly of itself brought into being. "I have not seen that sign."

"Nor has anyone else, your highness. To pass the time I have made signs up. This I call *hsien*. As you see, it is *mountain* and *man*."

He had not seen so much feeling before on Li Ssu's face. "Has it meaning?" He found himself shivering.

Li Ssu looked away. "It stands for an immortal who lives in the glow of the star Shou Hsing."

Prince Cheng's mouth grew dry. All knew he did not like to hear of death. Li Ssu had not said death but its negation. Immortal. Yet the one brought the other to mind. Prince Cheng found saliva to speak. "I too will be an immortal. I will offer up prayers to Shou Hsing. Where do I look?"

"To the brightest star in the southern sky. Further north it does not manifest itself. One might say it shines for your highness, for it knows your highness lives here."

Prince Cheng nodded.

Lu Pu-wei did not love the party of Confucian scholars at

court. He loved least their leader Wang Kuan. But he smiled now at Wang Kuan as they sat exchanging needful nothings. And while he waited for Wang Kuan to come to the point he busied his hands under his sleeves.

He still knotted cord to keep accounts as when he was a peddler, for though the sums he manipulated now were great sums they were still sums. It had been another good year. In the seven years since the thirteen-year-old had come to the throne the House of Lu had fattened. The new canal cutting across the state brought water rich in silt to put life in the alkaline soil; the yield had risen twenty-eight pecks a square *li*. Then there was the new grain station for provisioning troops; since he sold for himself and bought for the state . . .

Not that things of the flesh had it over things of the spirit in his thoughts. This last year a comet's brush had written across the sky. An auspicious sign. He had begun his great literary undertaking; he had set his scholars to the task of compiling *The Spring and Autumn of the House of Lu*. He would have to remind Li Ssu he counted on him to put in time on the work, to add wit and charm to it.

Wang Kuan had fallen silent and solemn. A slow finger pointed to Lu Pu-wei's bronze pendant

mirror. Lu Pu-wei knew himself to be properly groomed. A sign of warning, then. Look to yourself. Look to history, learn from former happenings. Wang Kuan's talk was full of weeds; it would take him long to spell out what his gesture meant. Longer, one did not burst out to the Prime Minister.

Lu Pu-wei said, to urge him to speak frankly, "A fishbone in the throat." He tried to look man rather than Prime Minister.

Wang Kuan said, "The fox shows his tail." Silky voice out of silky beard.

"What fox? What tail?"

Wang Kuan looked around as though admiring the stacks of bamboo volumes. He bent nearer Lu Pu-wei. "I marvel at the cunning brushes under your care and protection."

"I do my humble best to foster letters."

"Of them all I would say the most cunning is Li Ssu."

So Li Ssu was Wang Kuan's fox. Lu Pu-wei's fingers were still. "It is true he is an artist."

"I cannot praise enough the *tsou* he wrote, in which he advised the new king the time was now to make the seven warring states one and to do this by force of arms and by craft of tongue."

"A work of art. I must confess it owes something to my touch, Li Ssu having sought my counsel on certain phrasings."

"A work of art. For which his majesty made Li Ssu guest-minister. A great honor for a foreigner."

"And one he has earned." Li Ssu had put forward the canal, Li Ssu had put forward the grain station, Li Ssu had put forward the plan to unify the warring states under the state of Ch'in. Li Ssu was busy with many things. Lu Pu-wei waited Wang Kuan's fox's tail.

"Do you know he is urging his majesty to grant no more fiefs, this to put an end to warlords and their nagging little wars? Do you know he is urging his majesty to shift thousands of powerful families from one province to another, this to hinder uprisings as well as to furnish workers where there will be work? Does your excellency know Li Ssu has hinted to his majesty you are slow to move in such things, having more care to buy and sell than to upbuild? Has Li Ssu sought your counsel on phrasing these urgings and hintings?"

It would be a loss to the world if something kept Li Ssu from playing a part in the great literary underaking. Lu Pu-wei tightened a knot. It would be wise not to single out Li Ssu but to have the boy give out a decree ousting all guest-ministers, banishing all from the state. And it would be good to counterfeit partisanship

for Li Ssu, a partisanship willing but slow to move in such things, and to let the push seem to come from the Confucianist faction.

Lu Pu-wei smiled at Wang Kuan. "A young fox wets his tail crossing a stream." They were old foxes.

* * *

KING CHENG did not at once let the chamberlain hand him the *tsou* from Li Ssu. How was it Li Ssu dared argue against a measure of the ruler's? Had Li Ssu grown so foolish he did not know that simply by sending it in he rubbed the dragon's scales the wrong way and courted sure death?

It would be interesting to see how the man would chop logic. The king deigned to take up the joined slips. But the bamboo rattled in the royal hands as though a dragon ruffled its neck scales.

He read, and in spite of himself had to nod. It was true Ch'in had grown great by making use of such skilled aliens as came to hand. As to banishing sojourners,

"This is not how to master the earth within the Four Seas or yoke the vying princes. Your liege subject has heard the saying that when a country aggrandizes, crops abound; when a state is mighty, subjects multiply; when weapons are adamant, war-

riors are daring. So too, as Mount T'ai does not shrug off small clods, it has grown lofty; as the Yellow River and the Sea do not spit back small trickles, they have grown deep; as the exemplary kings did not scorn the various black-heads, their virtuous sways grew firm. . . ."

King Cheng had a broad face with the brow tapering away like a dragon's. Now the likeness heightened as he allowed himself a dragon smile. He read on.

"Yet shrug off persons, adding stature to other states; spit back guests, deepening pretensions of other princes; make the scholars of the whole world turn from the setting sun . . ."

The smile faded.

"—this is to arm marauders and to provision brigands. Many works do not stem from Ch'in yet have worth, many scholars are not Ch'inese born yet would be Ch'inese true. Yet spit out guests to foster the foe and to enlarge the enemy, unman this land and inseminate outrage abroad. Then try to safeguard the land; it will not work."

Now the long narrow eyes whitened and the toucher of the reversed scales of the dragon came near dying. Killing all foreign-born sojourning in Ch'in would keep them from going to serve and strengthen other states.

But that would cut him off

from the wider world, where were wonders—among them, it might be, the secret of eternal life. He folded the bamboo with care. The star Shou Hsing was saying to spare Li Ssu.

Yet the dragon, once astir, had to lash out at someone. It had come to King Cheng's ears the black-heads were laughing at an honorable title Lu Pu-wei held as prime minister—Second Father. And it was in King Cheng's mind that Lu Pu-wei had been communing overmuch with the queen mother. The charge would be clandestine plotting. When even the common people found fun in the manner of the king's birth it was time to remove the reminder, banish from the sight of king and people that broad mirror of the king's face, that other self, that older self. The king would banish Lu from place to place and in such a way that he would more and more lose face, till he understood, and took poison.

GUEST Minister Li Ssu undertook to gloss for King Cheng a writing of Han Fei's that the king had found to his liking. The writing went, "Wait to chance upon a naturally straight piece of wood and you will have no arrow for a hundred generations. Wait to chance upon a naturally round piece of wood and you will have no wheel

for a thousand generations. . . . But everywhere men drive chariots and shoot game—how come? Because they have the tools to force things into shape.” And Li Ssu said, “In plain, your majesty, only by means of the law, which promises reward and threatens torture, will men become upright and society encompass order.”

Wang Kuan grimaced to show he agreed with the interpretation but disagreed with the thought.

The king sighed and made to speak. The official court historian drew his brush from his cap to set down the words of the king.

“How I wish I had been living in the time of Han Fei!”

Li Ssu remained silent. Wang Kuan looked at him in surprise.

Then, smelling jealousy, Wang Kuan, though as a true Confucianist he detested the Legalist school and so held no brief for Han Fei, smiled and said, “But your majesty is so living. Is that not so, Li Ssu? Were you and Han Fei not fellow pupils of Hsun K’uang?”

“That is so.”

Wang Kuan could not let it rest at that. “It is in your majesty’s power to send to ask Han Fei to court, promising reward.”

King Cheng looked at Li Ssu, who bowed and so hid his eyes.

Han Fei found himself bowing before his king, the ruler of the

state of Han, smallest of the seven warring states. The king had long been deaf to Han Fei’s sound words, this though slaving Ch’in had been nibbling away at Han. Han Fei had seen his years coming on without a place at court. Han Fei had wearied of writing on statesmanship and turned to writing bitter tracts—“Solitary Vexation” and “The Five Vermin.” So now the king’s words fell strangely on Han Fei’s ears.

“We have not been unmindful of your merits. We have arranged for you to go to the court of Ch’in. We have made the way smooth so that King Cheng will welcome you. You will remember that you are a true son of Han and you will prevail on King Cheng to end forays across our western border. See that you justify our trust.”

Hen Fei, tongue-tied most when he most wanted to speak, tried to make the king understand how grateful he felt.

His majesty graciously waved away all thanks.

HAN FEI looked around the cell.

He thought of his own parable of the farmer of Sung who found a dead rabbit under a dead pine; excited at finding a tree against which running rabbits would club themselves to death, the farmer quit farming and sat

waiting under the pine while his land went to waste. At the time of making, Han Fei had meant that farmer to be the king of Han. Now Han Fei felt himself to be that rabbit. The tree was the welcome of King Cheng.

The walls bore scratchings Han Fei did not care to make out.

Footsteps. The door unbarred and grated open. But Han Fei saw it was not to let him out. It was to let another in. The man wore a concealing cloak. He leaned back and looked at Han Fei from under drooping eyelids.

"Have the years changed me so? It is your old friend Li Ssu." He spoke low and as though holding back tears, so that Han Fei would not have known the voice was the voice of Li Ssu.

It was a shock to see the change. But Han Fei knew the years had used him too. He felt near tears himself and would have liked to laugh with Li Ssu at remembrances of their callow arguments of twenty years ago. But he was most tongue-tied when he was most moved, and Li Ssu was speaking.

"We do not have much time. The king is sure you come plotting to take his life."

In his mind Han Fei could hear himself saying, "Being sure of a thing without a base of facts, this is foolishness. Basing a case on a thing one cannot be

sure of, this is fraud." But he knew the truth. As always when it came to the pinch he choked silent.

"I know you are guiltless, my friend. This is the work of the Confucianists, who scheme against us Legalists. But the king's men will wring words of guilt from your lips." Li Ssu drew a tiny vase from his sleeve. "I am helpless to do anything but this—and even this I do at great risk, out of friendship."

Han Fei took the tiny vase carefully into his hand and stood smiling at it gently.

The jailer came and whispered to Li Ssu. Han Fei could hear footsteps. Li Ssu turned urgently to Han Fei.

"They come. They come to torture you. Quickly, my friend, they come."

Han Fei would have looked into Li Ssu's eyes but Li Ssu's face was in shadow. Han Fei put the tiny vase to his lips, kept it touching as he threw his head back, held the bitter draft in his mouth. He gave himself time to think of gems he had wished to voice, of gems he would never voice, of gems men placed in a corpse's mouth.

The jailer made little whimpering sounds in the corridor. The footsteps rang louder. Han Fei swallowed, shivered.

"Go sweetly to the nine yellow springs, my friend."

Li Ssu turned to go. Han Fei saw only now, as Li Ssu slipped out, the left stroke of brow and the hooked downstroke of nose. This was not Li Ssu.

The door closed. The footsteps rang still louder.

Han Fei filled his lungs to cry out—but he had always been tongue-tied, and most when he most had call to speak. And King Cheng's men, coming to set Han Fei free, the king having learned that some blunderer had thrown his guest into prison, found Han Fei had set himself free and silent forever.

PRINCE Tan of Yen lent ear to his counselor.

"Is this the other half of Li Ssu's plan? Your highness has read the smuggled copy of the *tsou* in which Li Ssu urges his king to make the seven warring states one, by force and by craft. Ch'in is attacking our neighbor Chao, putting our own Yen in peril. That is force. A Ch'in general, fleeing the wrath of his king, seeks refuge at the court of Yen. This could be craft."

The counselor wheeled to face the man he spoke of and all eyes followed his gaze. But General Fan Yu-ch'i did not blink, did not protest. The counselor faced his prince again.

"If craft, is it wise to speak so freely before this man?"

Prince Tan looked mildly at

General Fan Yu-ch'i. "King Cheng has placed a great price on the general's head."

"What better way, your highness, for craft to hide craft?"

Prince Tan sighed. "Enough. He is a guest and we do not wish to insult our guests. Here are many guests, with as many grievances. We do not fear to speak. Who among you will take it on himself to rid the world of King Cheng?"

There was indrawing of breath then a *yao-yao* as of insects as Ching K'o of Wei came forward and bowed. All knew Ching K'o as a quiet person who would yield the right of way rather than fight over it. Then there was another indrawing of breath as General Fan Yu-ch'i kowtowed beside Ching K'o.

The counselor smiled. "Another volunteer? If you are the fugitive you say you are, you would not dare recross the border of Ch'in in any guise. If you are not, then you are a spy and would warn the king, and we should not let you go."

General Fan Yu-ch'i did not look at the counselor but at Prince Tan, waiting the prince's leave to speak. Getting it, he said, "In Ching K'o you have the man to do the deed. But where is the ruse whereby he wins to see the king?" He waited for murmuring to die. "If your highness will give me leave to

withdraw to my quarters, I will kill myself."

Prince Tan looked at him in mild surprise. "How is this?"

"Ching K'o will gain quick hearing when he takes my head to the king and claims the price."

There followed a long moment of stillness, then the counselor bared his belly and placed a stick on his shoulder to show that he owned his fault and that he begged rebuke.

Ching K'o carried the box with General Fan's head inside and Ch'in Wu-yang, a hard man whose kin Prince Tan would see to, carried a map case. They got into Ching K'o's carriage and set out for Ch'in. Prince Tan and those of his retainers in on the plot, all wearing white to token mourning, for Ching K'o had no hope of coming back alive, offered a sacrifice to the god of the roads and saw Ching K'o off as far as the bank of the I Shui. The river became a river of tears. Ching K'o did not look back.

ALL was rumor of war in the capital of Ch'in. But word a man had come to collect the reward for the head of General Fan outflow all.

King Cheng, who had been keeping Li Ssu waiting, being busy with Taoist magicians who

by reading milfoil stems and tortoise shells could tell the king his chances of finding the elixir of everlasting life, cut short the reading, which at this point bore on omens having to do with the king's son, Crown Prince Fu-su, for the king was anxious that auspices for the boy should be neither too bad or too good, and sent to bring the man in straightway.

In the lower hall Ching K'o gave gifts to the chamberlain and showed him the box. The chamberlain opened it. A quick glance showed him a head he knew to be General Fan's. He looked inquiringly at the map case Ch'in Wu-yang carried. Ching K'o opened the lid to show a silken scroll.

"That is a map of the fertile region of Tu-k'ang in Yen, your excellency. The map is a sign of cession; but"—he lowered his voice—"should Yen renege his majesty may find it of some small use in coming battles. I do not ask more than that. I ask only the price of the head. But should his majesty press me with his bounty I hope your excellency will be kind enough to take some share."

The chamberlain nodded graciously, signed to an officer of the palace guard. Soldiers searched Ching K'o and Ch'in Wu-yang, found them weaponless, let them follow the cham-

berlain up into the throne room, a bright, pillared hall.

The chamberlain led them past Li Ssu, past Crown Prince Fu-su, past Dr. Hsia Wu-chu, past the Taoist magicians Hsu Shih and Lu Ngao, to within thirty-three paces of the throne; he told them to kneel and remain at this spot. Ching K'o's eyes stayed on the king as the chamberlain went forward to kneel before the throne and speak to the king. The reward stood at one thousand catties of gold and a city of ten thousand families.

King Cheng looked at Ching K'o and Ch'in Wu-yang. "Approach the steps of the throne."

As they walked to the foot of the dais, Ch'in Wu-yang turned pale and shook. All eyes fell on him, and his pallor and shaking grew.

Ching K'o smiled and said, "This is a black-head who has never seen the Son of Heaven. So he trembles. Let it please the Great King to excuse him for a bit and permit this humble servant to draw near."

The king said, "Bring the map."

Ching K'o set the box down, took the map case and handed it to the king. The king took out the map, unrolled it, sat staring at the dagger that fell out. Ching K'o snatched it up, careful of the poisoned tip. With his left hand he seized the king's sleeve, with

his right hand he struck. The sleeve tore off in Ching K'o's hand as the king twisted away. Ch'in Wu-yang fell to the floor and groveled.

The boy, Crown Prince Fu-su, watched with big eyes the game his father and the man were playing. His father was running around the pillars and trying to tear his bronze sword loose. And the man was running after his father and trying to touch him with the dagger. All others were painted figures on silk.

Then Dr. Hsia hit the man with his medicine bag and threw the man off stride. And now his father had freed the sword and was taking backward cuts at the man. Then a dazzle shut all out.

Li Ssu, using his pendant mirror, had caught the light and strove to aim the beam.

The sword slashed the man's left thigh. The man stumbled, raised his hand to throw the dagger. For a wavering moment the mirror might have flashed into the king's eyes or the man's. Hanging in the balance, the beam lit the Crown Prince's stubborn mouth, swung to blind Ching K'o. The throw went wild, the dagger clattered off a pillar. And now the palace guards were upon Ching K'o.

KING CHENG had only begun to flesh his sword on his foes. By craft Ch'in broke up the



league of the six states against Ch'in, by force Ch'in picked them off. Han fell, and Chao, and Wei, and Ch'u, and Yen, and Ch'i.

When General Meng T'ien called for clash, the battle line of Ch'in—bowmen on the left flank, spearmen on the right, chariots of three and four horses abreast in the center, and everywhere banners and streamers—was a great rolling wave; the ears of the foe heard its rattle in horns, drums, cymbals, and gongs, then the ears of the slain foe filled bushels. When General Meng T'ien called for surprise, the officers of Ch'in put bits of wood in the mouths of the troops to keep them from talking; the ears of the foe heard nothing, then the ears of the slain foe filled bushels.

Much had changed while General Meng T'ien was at the wars. When he reached Hsien-yang, new capital of the empire, he saw how much.

The streets were full of sullen faces; 120,000 feudal families were here now, without roots, without force. New palaces filled the sky; at King Cheng's orders, whenever General Meng T'ien took the capital of a state he had sent back plans of the palace; now corridors radiated from the First Emperor's palace to six replicas. First Emperor—for the king was no longer a mere king but Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, the Only First of the Ch'in dynasty.

General Meng T'ien smiled as he rode past great bells that hung in bell frames having the shape of dragons with stags' heads. He smiled again when he came to the twelve towering statues, also bronze, having the form of northern barbarians. For the First Emperor had melted down and cast into those bells and frames and statues all the weapons of war of his beaten foes and all those in the hands of the feudal lords, so that in all the seven states, now one, only soldiers of the First Emperor bore weapons. General Meng T'ien rode out through the city gate.

He rode to the royal park, where A-fang, the First Emperor's summer residence, stood on the bank of the Wei. He looked at it and could believe it was the sweat and blood of seven hundred thousand convicts. He entered A-fang with much emotion. He had dreamed of this day. Now, after nine years of fighting, he could send his three hundred thousand veterans home to a piece of land from their grateful Emperor.

The First Emperor sat before the embroidered screen and Supreme Justice Li Ssu was there and the left-hand historian to write down what they did and the right-hand historian to write down what they said. And General Meng T'ien saw the Imperial Jade Seal with its inscription

"By command of Heaven to reign forever." And the soldier was in awe of the greatness of his master. Earth was his. Northward to Yu, where the rich built a fox chamber in their homes and set out food in it to propitiate ghost foxes, and southward to Annam, where windows faced north because of the heat; to the Sheep's-Gut Mountain and the Eastern Sea. Earth trembled at his name. Then the First Emperor spoke, and General Meng T'ien would not let himself think the First Emperor's voice sounded like the voice of a jackal.

General Meng T'ien tried to follow what the First Emperor said. He wondered why the First Emperor should be speaking to him of Tao and telling him how at Li Ssu's bidding the Taoist sage An-ch'i Sheng had visited the First Emperor and spoken with him three days and three nights of P'eng-lai, Fang-chang, and Ying-chou, the Three Island Mountains of the Eastern Sea, where genial fairies greeted comers with the elixir of everlasting life, a brew of the magic mushroom that grew there. The First Emperor mentioned that he had set the Taoist magicians Hsu Shih and Lu Ngao in charge of a fleet bearing gifts for the fairies—three thousand young men, five hundred virgins, seed grain, and craftsmen; they had sent up incense for divine winds and set

sail, but a storm came up and only flotsam washed back. But the First Emperor would not let this cast him down. He would keep on with his search for the magic mushroom. As Li Ssu had pointed out, only one thing human remained to keep the full mind of the First Emperor from fastening on the quest—the Huns of the steppes. They overshadowed his dream of eternal empire as those giant bronze statues overshadowed his capital. He had transformed one threat into reminder of another. One day the Hsiung-nu would fold their yurts and swarm over this land of peaches. Against that day he would build a wall. Was not "the piling up of earth to build a foundation" a symbol of immortality?

The General wondered why the First Emperor should be speaking to him of a wall. And then he began to understand that the First Emperor was not sending home the men whose swords had carved empire. The First Emperor was sending them north to build a wall.

General Meng T'ien stiffened, thinking of his three hundred thousand weary men, who alone had weapons. Then General Meng T'ien bowed.

GENERAL Meng T'ien looked up from the silken map to stare at the young man bowing

before him. The General's finger stayed where it had stopped in its retracing of the line Li Ssu had drawn across the map. General Meng T'ien remembered he had sent for this man, the finest horseman among his lieutenants. He stole a glance at a scrap of bamboo in the curl of his left palm.

"Pai Ma, look at this map."

Pai Ma glowed; General Meng knew his name. He hastened to look at the map, saw it was one of the empire. Across it ran a black line like the writhings of a dragon. He looked up with alert eyes and questioning smile. He saw General Meng scowling at him and grew faint. Then he saw General Meng was scowling not at him but through him, at something that had taken place or that had yet to take place.

The First Emperor had left the planning of the wall to Li Ssu, and General Meng T'ien was seeing himself and Li Ssu sitting down together. Li Ssu with strange eagerness watched General Meng T'ien spread out the latest map of the realm. Li Ssu with overelaborate care opened his writing case and inked his brush. General Meng T'ien drew out his own brush; its writing tip was of hair and he poised it with modest pride, for he had designed it himself. But Li Ssu did not note it to marvel at it and praise it. Li Ssu was taking his

measure of the map. "The wall must cast a long shadow. It should stand at least two *chang* high. And here is the course it must take." Li Ssu let his brush fly as if copying from a ready-made draft. General Meng T'ien watched with horror as the loops and twists took shape. He thought, Here is where I would turn aside, here a natural fastness, here a weak spot. He moves in darkness. General Meng T'ien chewed his brush to bits, then had to speak. He pointed to a place. "Here it is so steep the workers would have nowhere to stand. If we moved—" His eyes met Li Ssu's. He saw a caged fury he did not dare loose.

Pai Ma grew faint, seeing General Meng was indeed scowling at him.

"We move north to secure this area. You will follow this line. You will not deviate a millet grain. You will make trail of one hundred *li* a day."

Pai Ma bowed, took the map, bowed again, somehow found himself outside sitting on his horse, and he stung the horse into a gallop.

FOR Minister of Learning Wang Kuan time was too heavy because work was too light. It was Prime Minister Li Ssu who compiled the lexicon *Ts'ang-chieh p'ien* so that all would speak in one tongue. It was Li

Ssu who made over the old *ku* script into the new *chuan* style so that all would write in one hand. It was Li Ssu who formulated one set of weights and measures. It was Li Ssu who standardized even the axle lengths of wagons. It was Li Ssu who caused the copper coin to come in and the cowny to go out. It was Li Ssu who led the First Emperor to break with the old ways.

All Wang Kuan and his party could do was deplore the trend, and this merely gave Li Ssu more openings to say of the Confucianists "They blow aside the fur to seek faults." But Li Ssu did not have all his way; the teachings of K'ung Fu-tzu had a ghostly hold. It was Wang Kuan who saw the First Emperor feared to cut the belly cord of the mind. It was Wang Kuan who dared upbraid the First Emperor for each break with the old ways. It was Wang Kuan who still spoke out against Li Ssu.

* * *

Queen Mother Chichik thought often and with bitterness of the lot of a woman. Her son the First Emperor had, besides A-fang, 270 other palaces, all within a sweep of 200 *li*. Her son's palaces had each a stock of lovely women, spoils of conquest. Her son did not sleep twice running in the same palace, the Taoist sage An-ch'i

Sheng having warned him to keep secret his sacred whereabouts or spiteful spirits would cut him off in his quest of the magic mushroom. Queen Mother Chichik had only the women's quarters of a palace, and no man.

Since the banishment of Second Father Lu Pu-wei the Queen Mother could see in private only eunuchs. Now she began to notice an upstanding young man about the palace, a new gardener. Her majesty started to frequent the garden. She saw the young man would do as she said and be silent. The young man shaved to seem a eunuch, that he might enter the women's quarters.

It was not long before this came to the ears of the First Emperor. Li Ssu was tactful in telling but the First Emperor's rage was great. The First Emperor banished Queen Mother Chichik. The imperial torturer sought to learn from the once false eunuch who was it paid to place the once upstanding young man at the palace. But long ago someone had cut out the man's tongue and the man could frame to say only a meaningless "i 'u."

Minister of Learning Wang Kuan had heard of the First Emperor's rage at finding his mother out. But Wang Kuan would not be true to his Confucianist teachings if he did not speak out against unfilial conduct. It was

wrong for the child to judge the parent, wrong for the child to deal harshly with the parent, wrong for the child to drive the parent away. But this child was the First Emperor. If Wang Kuan spoke out he would touch the reversed scales of the dragon. It would be bad for Wang Kuan and his party. He could not tell how bad; he could not measure the root strength of the grass of Confucianist teachings or weigh the wind of First Emperor's wrath—it was Li Ssu who was the master of weights and measures. Wang Kuan did as he thought the Master would have done.

* * *

And, in the thirty-third year of his reign, Ch'in Shih Huang-ti did as he would.

Those with carping thoughts in the belly, those who preached the past to pervert the present and forestall the future, those died with all their kindred. Government officials who suffered them to break this law suffered the same retribution. Wagonloads of bamboo writings went up in flames, and the Classics and the histories of the states the First Emperor had crushed and all works that did not fit in with his rule wrote their ghosts in smoke. And those who failed to turn in, within thirty days of the edict, all books other than works on foretelling, on healing, on

farming and tree-growing, those the First Emperor's censors branded on the face like common criminals, shaved the head, ringed iron about the neck, and marched in the unending lines of the tortured and mutilated to the northern border to stand watch by day and work on the wall by night.

And the First Emperor commanded the scholars remaining to leave off speaking of the past and his secret agents provoked speech and the First Emperor buried 460 Confucian scholars alive.

And now it was as if the past had never been, as if the world had begun with the First Emperor. He looked at himself in his pendant mirror. There was a kind of immortality in building a wall against the past.

AT the crest of the hill Pai Ma reined in to breathe his mount. Breath plumed from the horse. Pai Ma sat beating his arms. The wind at this height cut through a man. But he was glad; according to the faded and frayed map three days' ride would bring him to the end—a twenty *chang* drop to the river.

He looked back the way he had come and saw the wall rising out of the hoofprints of his horse. To either side of the hoofprints or—where hoofprints would not show—arrowings of stone, men

scratched parallel lines twenty-five feet apart. Farther back, on ridge and slope, men deepened the scratches into trenches for the footings. Still farther back, on slope and ridge, men laid the foundations, men built up from the trenches twin walls twenty to thirty feet high of dressed granite, men hauled up baskets of earth, gravel, broken brick, and stone to fill the space between the faces, men tamped down the fill, men paved this high roadway by laying layers of foot-square impervious brick in lime mortar and took care that it drained, men shielded this roadway by raising man-high crenellated parapets and studded the wall with square watchtowers an arrow's flight from one another, and in each watchtower a sentinel watched for attack and stood ready to light a beacon fire of wolf's dung. At the passes, where wagons and horsemen might enter, General Meng T'ien posted garrisons of one hundred men or more, with food, medicines, and weapons to hold out for months. And in this way the wall writhed into being.

He faced forward, kneed his horse through the thin stand of pine, for the line on the map said to go through and not around. Coming out into unscreened wind man and horse bent their heads. So Pai Ma did not see at once what stood in the way. Then he

saw and the horse reared to a halt.

Before him a palanquin sat on the ground. It sat broadside to the flow of the river far below, as though the passenger wished to gaze across at a misty glow that might be fires of a Hunnish camp. Pai Ma looked around for bearers and attendants, saw no one. All seemed so still save for his horse's snorting that he thought no one was in the palanquin. And he wondered what had caused the abandonment. He put his hand on his sword and looked around again. Then a voice came from the palanquin.

"I said I wished to be alone."

The yellow silk curtains parted. He saw a woman. She wore a winter robe of fox fur and lamb-skin; the fox fur being the down on the fox's ribs, this was the finest of garments. This was a high person. This was the Queen Mother Chichik. Powder hid the lines that would betray her years, but her frown showed their hiding place. He dismounted and bowed. Her eyes took him in. A silken fan came into play.

"Who are you?"

He had lost his tongue.

"What do you here?"

"Your majesty—" He stammered his name and his mission.

"Come nearer."

He moved closer. Her eyebrows arched higher, her eyes smiled above the fan.

"You know of my banishment?"

His throat dry, he nodded. He was glad it was dusk.

She grew eager. "What is the gossip? How are things at court?"

He knew she had been later at the capital than himself. Still, Pai Ma had the latest by way of headquarters, for General Meng T'ien sent to stay in touch with Pai Ma. Pai Ma found his tongue; he was happy to speak with the great. She turned to gaze out across the river while he told her all he thought it wise for her to hear from him. After he had done, she remained so and he wondered if she had heard him. Then she turned back and looked at him and he remembered with an uneasy thrill what he had heard of her easily lifted robe. She smiled as though she knew the stir in him.

"Do you wonder why I sit here?"

It was not for him to wonder.

"I wished to look toward the yurts of my people." She smiled at his surprise. "Chichik is a Hsiung-nu name. It means Flower. It also means that my son is of the people he would build a wall against." She grew strangely gay. "Poor Pai Ma. You have been moons on the trail. It must be cold to sleep alone out here."

He sighed as a man full of cares, looked grave as a man true

to duty. She did not seem to see that look in the dusk.

She reached out and took his hand. "You will come with me and stay the night."

He did not dare withdraw his hand. "It is not that I do not wish to make this trip—"

"It is safe. Those who might be spies of the First Emperor proved to be thieves—at least, missing belongings of mine turned up in their things—and they have gone off to work on the wall. Call my servants to come carry me down."

He could not say no.

IT was late when he wakened. He bore the signs and pains of love—the dents of love-bites, the weals of scratches, the bruises of blows, the memory of cries. One did not have to burn incense on her belly and prick her with needles.

It was very late. He did not stay to eat but hurried to horse. The last he saw of her she lay snoring in bed.

It was too late to make this day's ride to where the messenger from General Meng T'ien would be waiting with provisions, gossip, and jealousy. If he kept to the line on the map, it was too late.

Pai Ma took up where he had left off, then struck out, deviating forty *li*. He had never made sense of the way the line ran, to

begin with, and he would be speeding the work. No one would ever know the difference.

* * *

Old Kung did not trust men who might be from the government. But the man seemed a true scholar; he went about setting down the songs of the black heads so they would not die when they died on the air.

And at last Old Kung had said, "Yes, I know a song. I do not know whether I made it or whether I heard it. But this is the song. I do not sing well. 'Though only three may live out of all Ch'u's kin, No other than Ch'u will cause the end of Ch'in.' I told you I do not sing well." Old Kung had sung too well.

Now old Kung worked beside a lord. The world had truly turned upside-down, Old Kung and a lord working on a wall. Old Kung did not sing now. The workers were all silent till they got on the rope to haul up a granite block, then they chanted and grunted together under the lash. Old Kung did not think of that as singing.

Clothing strips of rag, limbs lengths of bamboo, face blade thin, Old Kung worked beside a lord and it was hard to tell black head from lord.

At times Old Kung coughed blood, looked up at a kite and smiled. Above ground, food for

kites, below ground, food for mole-crickets and ants; here it was neither—dead bodies served as fill, were food for the wall.

The lord at times smiled too, his eyes were in dream.

The Lady Chiang-nu wondered if willow grew where her lord was, ten thousand *li* away, to make him pine for home. By day her sleeves were wet, by night her pillow.

All nights were long. But she knew a degree of quiet this night. The moon spread fan-wise as clouds passed. In the morning her faithful manservant was setting out to her husband at the wall.

The servant drove the cart with all haste toward the building wall. He would let nothing stop him from reaching his lady's master with food and clothing. He would dare more. If he saw it went hard with his lady's master, he would help his lord get away.

It outraged the faithful servant to hear that of 182 cartloads of rice only one had reached the workers on the wall, that already a half million had starved to death, that the First Emperor had pressed every third man in the empire into the work. The servant drove the cart toward the building wall.

Even where the soil was loose,

and wagon wheels cut deep, the going was not too tiresome. The cart, with its axle length the same as that of all other carts, followed easily in the tracks of the one before.

Too easily. For the nearer he came to the Great Wall, and the more he heard, the slower the servant wished to go. Ch'u Kung, the *yu-shih* of the Ch'in, was a striking hawk and the men of his press gangs were men of beaks and claws. The lash of the enforcer saw the workers did not drowse their lives away.

When at the crest of a hill the servant came within sight of the Great Wall he lashed the cart around and drove with all haste away from the Great Wall.

THE eunuch Chao Kao wondered that Li Ssu had lost his zeal to run things once the Great Wall stood. Li Ssu had shown a gloating zeal while it was building; had he caused its building because he liked human suffering, because he had some inward torment of his own?

Chao Kao knew only that Li Ssu seemed merely to be waiting. Often Li Ssu looked at the sky as though waiting, with frozen fury, some sign from the gods. Chao Kao rejoiced that Li Ssu had lost his zeal. But it was best to shun show of wonder and rejoicing, best to move carefully. For once Li Ssu had thrown fear

into Chao Kao by looking at him and saying, "Do not tell a king you have dreamed you were king."

But Li Ssu had lost his zeal. His indifference could be harder to take than his frowns, as in letting Chao Kao and Meng I, brother of General Meng T'ien, battle it out between themselves. Meng I gained when he became the First Emperor's chariot companion. Chao Kao gained when by devoting himself to the lore of penal laws he won the First Emperor's favor and became Keeper of the Chariots. Chao Kao slipped when, at the very time he was tutoring Prince Hu-hai in how to decide criminal cases, the law caught him out in a shameful crime. Meng I gained what seemed the game when, deciding the case, he stripped Chao Kao of post and rank and sentenced him to death. But Chao Kao came back when the First Emperor, weighing Chao Kao's assiduousness in his work, pardoned him and restored him to his place. Li Ssu treated their deadly game as of little moment. Chao Kao found this infuriating and comforting. Li Ssu had lost his zeal.

Li Ssu showed quick interest when news reached court a stone from heaven had landed. But when he went with the First Emperor to see it, and saw it, his in-

terest died. The First Emperor's interest did not die. For someone had scratched on the molten mass, as though this was word from the gods, that the empire would split up on Ch'in Shih Huang-ti's death. The First Emperor in fury had Ch'u Kung's men smash the meteorite and kill everyone living thereabouts, this to do away with the one who had dared write sacrilege and all who had dared look upon it.

* * *

The First Emperor grew shorter of temper. The magic mushroom continued to elude him. Further attempts to kill him made him more fearful. In the thirty-sixth year of his reign, the year the huge meteorite landed, he had scholars write poems about the immortals. Still the immortals did not come forth with the magic mushroom.

He held the tool to make round the wheel, to make straight the road; he had craftsmen to engrave *sung* on jade tablets to honor his own works; he had Li Ssu to write inscriptions attesting his visits to the mountains where the immortal spirits dwelt. But he did not have the magic mushroom.

He still handled 120 pounds of bamboo documents daily, still traveled his empire visiting the mountains and streams and seeing his works, grew still shorter

of temper. He banished Crown Prince Fu-su to serve with the northern army guarding the Great Wall.

In the winter of the thirty-seventh year of his reign he set out on a tour to K'uai-chi, then turned north along the coast to Lang-ya. On the way he sickened, and sent Meng I back to pray to the spirits of the mountains and the streams. The rush-covered wheels of the First Emperor's carriage bore him to Sha-ch'iu, where he died.

Chao Kao, Keeper of the Char-iots, spoke to Prime Minister Li Ssu and Prince Hu-hai; these three had been in steady waiting on the First Emperor in his last hours. Hu-hai himself had waved the yak's tail fly brush. But the First Emperor had not with his failing breath unmade Crown Prince Fu-su, had not named younger son Hu-hai Crown Prince. Meng I was yet away. Li Ssu smiled faintly and agreed they should keep the death secret.

It was a day of drizzle when Ch'u Kung came with the letter from the First Emperor. Both Prince Fu-su and General Meng T'ien shivered a little when the *yu-shih* came in; the man brought cold into the room with him.

Crown Prince Fu-su gave a bitter turn to his stubborn mouth, obeyed the wish of his father and

killed himself. But the fox listens to the sound of the ice under his feet when he crosses it, and General Meng T'ien sent back demanding verification of the word from above. He had his answer at once. Ch'u Kung had brought with him a bodyguard of Li Ssu's retainers, and these took the place of General Meng T'ien's attendants.

The First Emperor rode back toward Hsien-yang in a closed carriage. But the corpse stank.

Chao Kao's voice sounded like a flute made of the hollow leg bone of a bird. "Smell him! Everyone will know the First Emperor is dead!"

Li Ssu grimaced and sent his servants for bushels of stale fish and had his servants pile the fish on a cart following after the closed carriage. And so they kept the First Emperor's death secret till the cortege ground to a halt in Hsien-yang.

There they laid Ch'in Shih Huang-ti to rest in the Ninth Moon of that year, among the Black Horse Hills, in the tomb he had begun two years before, ninety *li* from Hsien-yang. Deep in the great tomb his boat-shaped coffin floated on a quicksilver river, craftsmen having laid out the bronze floor as a map of the empire. The constellations shone from the roof in the light of huge candles of seal fat. And

there they set up catapults and bows that would shoot anyone daring to break in. And they buried alive with him hundreds of his concubines—those who had not borne him children—and many warriors. And when the craftsmen had sealed the passages leading to the chamber, the great outer gate dropped, burying them alive with their secrets. Outside, a sixteen-mile-long chain of soldiers carried earth from the Yellow River to cover the tomb, and workmen sowed grass and plants to make the tomb seem a hill, the work of nature.

CHAO KAO persuaded Hu-hai, now Erh-shih Huang-ti, Sovereign Emperor of the Second Generation, to send the *yu-shih* to Tai, where Meng I remained under arrest, to confer death on Meng I. Ch'u Kung rode to Tai and told Meng I the Second Emperor wished him to drink the waters of eternal life. Meng I said, "Remind the Second Emperor that a ruler with principles does not kill the guiltless." But Ch'u Kung knew Chao Kao's mind and slew Meng I.

Chao Kao persuaded the Second Emperor to send the *yu-shih* to Yang-chou, where Meng I's brother remained under arrest, to confer death on General Meng T'ien. Ch'u Kung rode to Yang-chou and told General Meng

T'ien the Second Emperor wished him to drink the waters of eternal life. General Meng T'ien sighed a heavy sigh. "What guilt have I under Heaven? I die without guilt!" He fell silent, then said at last, "Truly, I may have done a thing to die for. I can only think that, somewhere in the ten thousand *li* between Lin-t'ao and Liao-tung, between one end of the Great Wall and the other, a footing trench cut the veins of the earth. That is my guilt." And he swallowed poison and died.

* * *

Chao Kao persuaded the Second Emperor surpassingly. One day when they were out hunting and the Second Emperor spotting a stag and wishing to show that his thoughts were deep thoughts said, fitting arrow to bow, "It is fitting to kill the horned stag with the horn-bow," Chao Kao looked at him, and at the others, and said, "What, your majesty? A stag? To the foolish eyes of your servant, that is a horse."

The Second Emperor laughed and turned to Li Ssu for support. Li Ssu did not trouble to raise to his eyes the odd piece of thin clear jade he had dished and rubbed smooth and had taken to peering through; he said shrugging, "I cannot tell."

The Second Emperor looked to Shu-sun T'ung, who said readily, "That is a horse, your majesty."

The Second Emperor stared at Shu-sun T'ung's straight face, then turned to others of his attendants for witness. All bore out Chao Kao. "That is a horse, your majesty."

The Second Emperor, not trusting his aim or his senses, forwent the kill that would have proved the horse a stag or the stag a horse. And as they rode on, he knew he had been dreaming—indeed, still dreamed, for what he heard behind his back could not be his servants muffledly laughing at the Second Emperor, ruler over earth.

THE Second Emperor sat under a canopy in his garden, alone. He wished to be alone for a time; he was thinking bitter thoughts and did not want on him the eyes of those who were his servants in name and Prime Minister Chao Kao's in fact.

He eyed a peacock trailing its train across the grass. "I outglory the peacock but have not even the peacock's screech. I am my own court jester."

A sudden shadow cut across his thoughts. Unless the Second Emperor had been dreaming again, no one could have walked the lawn to stand before him without writing many warning steps of shadow. Yet a man stood there.

The man—or demon—or thing of dream—had skin the hue of

jade and nothing to hide his jade nakedness but a kind of girdle studded with strange gems; he carried another such girdle in his left hand. In his right he held a square of some stuff.

The stranger did not bow. The Second Emperor's hand darted toward his sword. The stranger uncrooked a finger from about the girdle he carried to touch a gem in the girdle he wore. The Second Emperor's arm froze in a stiff curve in the air as though to ward, nor could he move at all.

The stranger touched another gem. As though his own mind framed to speak them, the Second Emperor heard words. And the Second Emperor knew it was the stranger speaking silently; it was the stranger asking him the whereabouts of a man.

The Second Emperor looked at the stranger in wonder. "That man died long ago." The Second Emperor did not know himself whether he spoke it or thought it, but the stranger seemed to hear and understand the answer. Yet the stranger appeared unwilling to believe it. The stranger glanced at the square he held in his right hand and asked again. And again the Second Emperor answered the same, and the stranger seemed to know the Second Emperor spoke or thought the truth.

The stranger eyed the spare girdle he carried in his left hand, made a face, let the square fall

from his right hand, touched yet another gem on the girdle he wore, vanished.

After a time the Second Emperor picked up the thing the stranger had let fall. He felt the stuff; not silk, not thinnest bamboo, though it had the smoothness of the one and the stiffness of the other. Neither was the dragonlike image it bore on one face the work of a brush; he saw no sign of brushstroke. With a sense of shock he saw the image for what it was—the Great Wall and its shadow, as though you looked from on high, from such a height that you saw the full ten thousand *li* writhing of the Great Wall. He felt the stuff again; this much was not dream. Unless all was dream.

The Second Emperor hid the image in his sleeve, called his servants, and went for a ride in his carriage to see fall leaves. At the city wall he commanded the carriage turn into the prison. The servants hesitated and looked at each other, but Prime Minister Chao Kao was not here to say yes or no.

LI SSU fingered the scratchings on the cell wall idly, not bothering to make them out. He seemed to get no gladness out of the sunshine that lit them enough to read. He heard a honking and looked out at the small sky. Wild geese flew in the shape

of the character "man." With sudden ferocity Li Ssu knocked his knuckles on the wall, dug his nails in the wall. Then his hands fell, dead weights. He stood so a long while. Dully he heard wheels and hooves, footsteps, then the Second Emperor was in the cell. Li Ssu smiled twistedly and bowed stiffly.

The Second Emperor wavered. Even Li Ssu would laugh if the Second Emperor told him of the visitation. The Second Emperor sighed and drew forth the image and held it out to Li Ssu.

Li Ssu took it in slow wonder, brought it close to his face. Something kindled in the cold shell of Li Ssu and for the first time the Second Emperor sensed real warmth in the man. He knew Li Ssu would believe him. He made up his mind to set Li free, to restore him and with him destroy Chao Kao.

The Second Emperor started as Li Ssu took hold of his sleeve. The Second Emperor saw dark smears on Li Ssu's hand.

"Where is the one who brought this?"

"He has gone."

"Nonsense! Did he not ask for me?"

"For you? He asked for my . . . my father's minister, him who died in banishment."

Li Ssu stared at the Second Emperor, then brought the image again to his face. He scanned it as though reading it. And to one who knew, it was writing. Li Ssu's finger stabbed the Great Wall. Here, near one end, was a deviation. One who could read the writing of the Great Wall would ask for the Emperor's minister Lu in lieu of the Emperor's minister Li.

A cry broke out from him that shook the Second Emperor. A cry in some strange tongue. Li Ssu looked as though he would burst his fleshly bonds. He moved into the ray of the sun and the Second Emperor goosefleshed to see that Li Ssu's skin seemed to have turned pale jade.

The Second Emperor made up his mind, even as he drew back in fear, that, for frightening the Second Emperor, Li Ssu would die a terrible death.

* * *

The rise and fall of the Great Wall is the rise and fall of the earth. The Great Wall curves, lithe as a brocade dragon, across mount and vale. Where earth rises to melt in the clouds, the Great Wall stands there; where earth falls away to drown in the sea, there the Great Wall stands.

THE END

Threshold of the Prophet

ROGER ZELAZNY

*The day the Brooklyn Bridge fell into the East River
the shade of Hart Crane appeared upon the bank
and accosted the man who stood there.*

WHY did you do that?" he asked.

"It was getting to be an eyesore," answered the goggled man, switching off his slice-unit. "It was no good anymore. Would have fallen in a couple years."

"How will people cross the river now?"

The man eyed the brick-red face before him—the coils of seaweed caught in stark hair. . . . He pressed a stud at his belt and rose above the ground.

"Same as always," he stated. "Personal flight unit, or car."

Crane rose into the air and drifted beside him. Slow moving vehicles crossed the sky overhead. People, all in gray, passed at lower heights. The prospect resembled the teeth of an enormous comb: rank upon rank, the dark buildings filed beneath them; an occasional antenna, like a caught strand of hair, quivered above the skyline; there

was no grass nor bare earth visible. His companion was as gray as the city.

"Where are the colors? New York was always colors."

"You're a real throwback, that's what you are. Doesn't that horrible sky hurt your eyes?"

He looked up.

"Same blue it's always been."

"Well, as soon as the Council passes a resolution, Weather Control will make it a lot easier to look at."

"What do you mean?"

"Damping units. We'll kill the glare, the color."

"Take the blue out of the sky?"

"Exactly."

Crane looked back at the muddy snake of the East River.

"What about the bridge? Won't it be a hazard for boats?"

"Boats? Where are you from, anyhow? The last boat was dismantled two hundred years ago

—after people decided it wasn't worth half a credit to ride to Staten Island when they could fly it for nothing—and in less time."

"And you'll just leave the bridge where it fell?"

"Time and the river will take care of it," laughed the man. "Why? You want it?"

"I'll take it, if no one else does."

"Go ahead. It belongs to anyone who cares to haul it away.—The scrap won't be worth much."

He studied the man gliding abreast of him.

"You must have an awfully compact flying unit. I've been trying to guess where you're wearing it."

"Keep guessing."

". . . And those clothes, and the way you talk. Where are you from?"

"I've been on a voyage."

"Oh—the outer planets. Ever been on Earth before?"

"Not this world."

"Well, get a good eyeful. It's worth the trip."

Crane nodded.

A MAN once wrote a poem about that bridge." He nodded toward it.

"Can't prove it by me. Do they still read poetry on the out-worlds?"

"I'd like to think so. Aren't there any poets here?"

"Why? Metaphor is an awfully crude manner of description. It's pleasant to think most people have passed beyond the stage where everything is like something else. An object is itself. Why complicate matters? Life is mathematics."

"That's nice to know. —But what of the dark places, where there is no mathematic? The open end of the human equation . . . ?"

The gray man winced.

"Don't talk about death or insanity! We'll beat them yet!" He clenched his fist. "Don't they teach you politeness on the out-worlds? Some things are not fit subjects for conversation."

"But what do you do about them?"

The gray man looked down at the gray city.

"We are shedding light in every dark place in the universe—that is the new poetry! Everything will be explained sooner or later. We are conquering every natural phenomenon with reason."

"Can you explain this?" asked Crane, seizing his wrist. He held the protesting hand against his chest.

The man's face sagged.

"You have no heartbeat!"

"That," said Crane, "is as accurate a statement as science can manage. Good day."

He vanished.

The man changed his course. He hurried toward the Institute of Mental Health.

* * *

"Hello, mister."

The old man removed his pipe from between his teeth and nodded.

"H'lo."

Crane leaned against the rail of the porch.

"I see you have grass up here, and a couple trees." He looked over the sparse lawn and past the two maples that guarded a twisted path by the river.

"Yep." The man scratched his nose with the pipestem. "Kinda like 'em. Don't see any in town anymore. 'T's why I moved up here."

"The air seems cleaner too."

"Yep. And they won't dampen the sky this far north, by ga'!"

"That's true. I've been through this part of the country before. —That's a nice little piece of river you've got going by."

"Pretty, all right."

The man regarded him with curiosity.

"Sort of odd look you've got about you, fella. Where you from?"

"The outer worlds."

"Oh yeah. Been out there twict, m'self. Not much to see."

Crane shrugged.

"Every place has its own style in beauty, I guess."

"S'pose so," he acknowledged.

"Look," Crane began, "I had a reason for stopping here. I wanted to find someone older, who might remember a little about the way things used to be."

"I can remember back a hundred-forty, hundred-fifty year, mebbe . . ."

"Good. I've got a deal to offer you."

The old eyes squinted through the old glasses.

"What kinda deal?"

"Want to buy the Brooklyn Bridge?"

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" The man shook, slapping his thigh. Tears ran down his cheeks.

"It's been a hundred year since I heerd that one! Didn't know anyone else remembered it. You're a card, sonny!"

"I'm serious," said Crane: "I'll bring it here and put it right across the river for you. I can do it. It's mine now."

The man twisted his head to one side and studied his face.

"By ga'! You're not kiddin'!"

"No. I'm dead serious."

"What would I want with the Brooklyn Bridge across my river?"

"It meant something once," said Crane. "It was a symbol in the old days, of everything man was, crossing over, always crossing over, into something greater and better. I think it ought to be preserved—as a monument."

"Sonny, the future's already here. And man doesn't have to cross on to anything better or greater. He's pretty great and pretty good right now."

"I'd expect that from a New Englander," smiled Crane, sadly, "but you live right outside New York, and you're old—you remember other days. If I could find someone to whom the bridge meant something, I might preserve it. I'll give it to you for a dollar—I mean, a credit."

"I wouldn't give you anything for it, sonny. I moved out here to get away from all that hardware, and people think I'm odd enough as it is. I don't think you could sell it to any man alive."

Crane nodded.

"That's what I figured."

"Come and set a spell anyhow, boy. I've got some cold synthocider here." The man turned.

"Thanks, but I have to be going. I only drink the real thing, anyhow."

The man started.

"There ain't been no real cider since I was a boy," he said. "There ain't been no apple trees for two hundred years!"

But there was no one standing there to hear him.

* * *

"All right," he said, soaring. "All right, you prosaic-minded goggle-wearers. You've had it! Knock down my bridge? Empty the sky of blue? Erase the bright

burden of the rose and the apple? You want to shed light in every dark place in the universe, huh? Step right up, kiddies, I'm going to give you something to think about!"

And he raised the bridge, as delicately as a cat lifts her kitten.

"'O harp and altar, of the fury fused . . .'"

He aligned the cables and erased the rust spots. He grew new metal where there had been holes.

"'Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge . . .'"

He arced the gleaming span across the river once more, from where the gray man had toppled it that morning.

"'Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry . . .'"

And in the middle, in the middle of the bridge, he built an opaque arch, where every color of the banished rainbow shimmered and danced.

"Come all ye faithful!" his voice boomed, like the ghost of all the gone foghorns. "Step right up, ladies and gentlemen!"

He mounted to the highest point of the span and looked down and around. He reached behind space and tied an inter-dimensional knot. He twisted the fabric of the continuum, joining remoteness with nearness.

"Half a credit!" he called out. "Half a credit for the most amazing sight of all! No crowding,

please! Just step right up!"

People darkened the sky, driven by their desire to know, to explain. They adjusted their goggles and hovered above the circle of color. One man stared up at him. He recognized the bridge-killer.

"Did you put it back?" asked the man. "Are you responsible for the light phenomenon?"

"You gave it to me, didn't you?" he answered. "Now I'm giving it back to you—with improvements and additions."

"What is that?"

The man pointed at the glowing portal.

"Step through it and take a look."

He did.

There was a long, neck-tin-gling silence.

A car pushed through the crowd of hoverers.

"What is that thing?" called

the uniformed driver asked him.

"Go through it and see for yourself."

The car nosed ahead and vanished.

Three of the airborne crowd pushed through the veils of color in speedy succession.

No one emerged.

"'O brilliant kids,'" Crane recited, "'fondle your shells and sticks, bleached by time and the elements . . .'"

He descended slowly, like the ghost of all his dead seagulls.

"' . . . But there is a line you must not cross nor ever trust beyond it spry cordage of your bodies . . .'"

He hovered a moment in their midst, smiling, then stepped through the crown of light. They did not hear his last words, bubbling on the other side:

"'The bottom of the sea is cruel . . .'"

THE END

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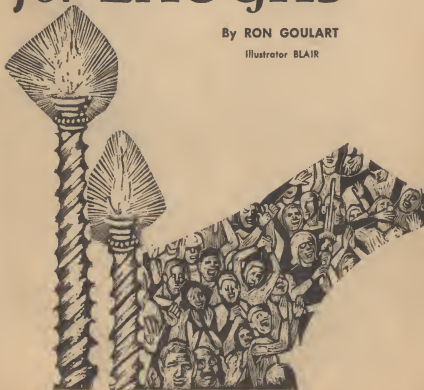
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ANYTHING for LAUGHS

By RON GOULART

Illustrator BLAIR





If you're a court jester with no previous experience, you gotta go with slapstick. Like throwing rotten fruit at a guy, or whacking him over the head, or even whipping up a small revolution.



SOMETHING came crunching across the simulated beach and then Daniel Godfrey's shoulder was poked by a shoed foot. He opened his eyes and looked up. His sweetheart was standing over him, fully clothed, a bundle of colored punch cards in her slender hands. "Hello," said Dan, pushing himself up to a sitting position with his elbows.

"I thought you'd be here, Daniel," said Karen Singletree. "I've made up my mind. That's why I'm willing to give up my lunch period for you. Get dressed now, please."

Removing the tinted lenses from his eyeballs Dan said, "No job interviews today, Karen."

"Up, up," the pretty brunette said. She put all the cards in her left hand and knifed her flat right into the crotch at his shoulder joint. "It's all arranged."

Dan stood up and watched the blue ceiling of the indoor beach. Right on time the automated seagulls started to circle. "Karen, our agreement is I don't have to look for work on the day I pick up my unemployment check."

"Daniel," said Karen, "it's been three weeks since you were let go from the Prelim Processing Division of Suburban Clerical. Three weeks, Daniel. The grass is growing. The wheels are turning. And you? You're sitting on this beach with a lot of other ne'er-do-wells and freeloaders."

"And playboys," said Dan, finding his locker key under his towel. "Anyway, there hasn't been any grass in Keystone City for seventy years."

"A truism doesn't have to be technically accurate," the girl said. "Quick now. Get yourself all nice and presentable."

Dan rolled up his towel. "Where am I going?"

Karen smiled and held up the punch cards. "I had new copies made of all your records and resumé's. My treat."

"Who am I talking to?"

THE girl caught his shoulder and started him off toward the dressing rooms, which were disguised as native huts this week. "I wangled you a chance at the Vocational Lottery."

Dan stopped deadstill. "No." He shook his head. "No, no, Karen. Just because I can't seem to hold a job for more than two or three months. No. I'm only twenty-seven afterall. There's still hope."

"But," said Karen, lowering her voice, "will there be hope for us?"

"What?"

"You're turning into a beach comber," the girl said. "Living off the state. Fight, Daniel. Please, fight."

"Who'll I fight?"

"I mean, fight for a place in Society."

"How's the Vocational Lottery going to help with that?" he asked. "It's all just a matter of chance with them."

"The girl in my building who shares my dispoze hole's husband won a vice presidency there. And he won't be twenty-five until autumn."

"Look," said Dan, "it's a fine gimmick for the government. In order to get people to volunteer for all the lousy jobs in this planet system they run the Vocational Lottery. They toss in a few soft jobs as bait. The rest of the jobs available are godawful, Karen. And isn't one of the rules that you have to work at whatever job you win for no less than six months?"

"Yes," she said. "That would be a record for you. No matter what the job." She made one hand into an encouraging fist. "I know you'll win a splendid job, Daniel."

"The odd's are against my winning anything very good."

"Well," said Karen, "it's either the Lottery. Or goodbye."

Dan looked at her for a moment in the bright synthetic sunlight. "Okay, it's the Lottery."

* * *

The beaded curtain at the door of the Personnel Manager's office clicked and rattled a long time after Dan had entered and taken a purple interviewee chair.

The Personnel Manager of the

Vocational Lottery was a thin, taut skinned man of sixty. He wore formal attire and in his left eye there was an oversize, rose tinted contact lens. "Your records seem to be all in order," he said, shuffling the punch cards into a neat pack.

"Thank you," said Dan.

"You've held quite a few jobs."

"I've never seemed to hit on the right one. I've got the idea that my guidance android in college was on the fritz. You really can't trust an android 100%, meaning no offense."

The manager stiffened. "I'm not an andy."

"I know," said Dan. "I just meant the whole Vocational Lottery seems to be staffed quite heavily with androids."

"Equal opportunity for all is our motto at the casino." The brittle old man rose, saying, "You understand the rules. We place your resumé card in a glass bowl and you wait until it is drawn by one of our staff of blindfolded little girls. Around the room in which the drawing is held are thirteen doors—I hope you aren't superstitious? No? Fine—At any one time only two of these doors will be unlocked. The open sequence changes as each card is drawn. When your name is called you start trying the doors. You must go through the first one that opens. You understand thus far?"

"Sure," said Dan. "Seems fair enough."

"Behind the door you will meet one of our Job Counselors. He will be, I'm afraid, an android."

"That's okay."

"Good. On his desk the Job Counselor will have three aruba shells."

"Beg pardon?"

"Aruba shells," said the Manager. "You know, the shell of an aruba."

"Oh, sure."

"You will be allowed to pick one shell. The Job Counselor will lift it and beneath you will find your job assignment."

"And if I don't like it?"

The old man smiled. "You have one escape clause. The Counselor is authorized to provide you with two bite-size capsules of poison. Otherwise, you must take the job. It's in the agreement you signed."

"My girlfriend, Karen Singletree, signed that for me I guess."

"You wish to reconsider?"

"No," said Dan. "People are always making decisions for me. No reason to stop now."

"That's the way." He put his hand on Dan's shoulder and led him down a softlit, thick carpeted corridor.

"People really fit into the jobs they get this way?" Dan asked as he neared the swinging doors of the Lottery's Drawing Room.

"This system seems to work as

well as any," the Personnel Manager said, sending Dan through the doors.

THERE was no one else on the flight to Murdstone. That was not surprising. Murdstone was the least favored planet in the drab Barnum system of planets. And right now it was having some kind of civil war or other. Daniel Godfrey wasn't too sure on the details. Karen had become hysterical half way through her outlining of the political setup on Murdstone.

People always ended up blaming you for the results and consequences of the decisions they'd made for you. Karen hadn't come to the spaceport to see Dan off. She had sent him an odd shaped package. The package turned out to contain all his records and twenty-three copies of his resumé, topped off by their friendship ring.

Dan folded his arms and hunched down in the cracked psuedoplastic passenger chair. Karen had been counting on his coming out of the Vocational Lottery with a good paying executive job in some impressive and respectable industry.

The idea that Dan was going to Murdstone to be a Court Jester, though. That was too much for Karen to adjust to.

Even Dan was a little unsettled. He had no idea what the

Monarchy of The Prime Territory was like or what they would find funny. Vocational Lottery had guaranteed on-the-job training.

He sank further into the seat and closed his eyes. No use worrying about it. For the next six months, no matter what, he'd have a steady job and he would not have to make a single decision. The situation had that to say for it.

* * *

A dust storm was sweeping across the rutted overgrown field of the spaceport. Three scarlet uniformed musical androids went cartwheeling across the field, pushed by the wind.

"There goes the reception," said the silverhatted young man who pulled Dan through a door marked Customs. "We'd planned on a few welcoming songs but the wind billowed away our band." He held out his hand. "My name is Enforcer JG Buttoney. Sent out from the Palace at Prime Territory to greet you."

"Are you customs, too?" asked Dan. The pilot had helped him carry his four pieces of luggage into this creaking building. They were sitting in a row between Dan and Buttoney.

"Thanks for reminding me," said Enforcer JG Buttoney, fishing a sticker out of an inside pocket. "Would you mind licking that. I have a thing about glue."

"Sure," said Dan. He ran his tongue along the sticker. "Now?"

"Oh, yes. Stick it on one of your bags. That should serve to make it all official." Buttoney smiled. "Off the cuff, I can tell you that this is not the height of the tourist season. Our Customs Inspector asked if he could take some time off to visit a second cousin of his in Territory #11."

"So you let him."

"No," said Buttoney, "we shot him. You don't ask for favors on Murdstone. We're under Royal Law right now, you know."

"I don't follow the news too closely."

"You wouldn't see it anyway," said the Junior Grade Enforcer. "We suppress all the news. Lot simpler than censoring every damn item that comes along." He glanced across the shadowy room. The wind outside was fading some and the harsh grating of the dust on the thin walls was subsiding. Near an empty, sprung doored soft drink dispenser, stood a short fat man in a loose blue suit. He had his hands in his pockets and seemed to be trying to outstare the brim of his yellow hat. Buttoney called to him. "Tomlin. Over here."

The fat man moved. He tipped his hat. He hitched up his pants. He came running toward them. Halfway there his foot seemed to catch in the cuff of his pants and he fell. He spun over twice and

then slid on his back. He came to his feet a yard in front of Buttoney and Dan. "Yes, sir?"

The Enforcer JG took off his blackvisored silver cap and bent forward. He laughed. He slapped his cap against the gold stripe on his trousers. "Beautiful," he said. "That is a classic."

Tomlin curtsied. "Yes, sir."

"Seriously," said Buttoney, catching his breath. "Give Daniel Godfrey here a hand with his luggage. Stowe it in the halftrack."

The fat man picked up the two heaviest pieces and shuffled off. "Yes, sir."

BUTTONEY looked after him, shaking his head. "Splendid. Really classic, wasn't it?"

"His falling down?" said Dan, catching hold of the remaining suitcases.

"I suppose it's not as funny to you as it is to me. You being in the business. I think, though, that you're going to find Tomlin an excellent assistant."

"Oh, so?" said Dan. "My assistant?"

"Right. Tomlin is Assistant Court Jester. He has a really classic approach to the comedic art. Boy."

Approaching the halftrack parked down from the spaceport building Dan got control of himself. If they wanted him to fall down, he'd fall down. He was obliging. Besides which, he was

stuck here on Murdstone for six months.

There was a girl standing alongside Tomlin. A tall slender girl with her dark orange scarf wrapped around her face against the dust.

"The press," said Buttoney into Dan's ear.

"I thought you'd stamped it out."

"We still let the folks at home read a little something. Sports, propaganda, show biz doings and social notes. That girl is Jean Parchman of the *Prime Territory News-Flame*. Cute kid."

"She here to cover my arrival?"

"It's show biz news. Yes."

They reached the halftrack. The storm was dying, the dust was swirling sluggishly. Dan put his suitcases where Tomlin indicated and then took the back seat Buttoney pointed at.

The newspaper girl got in the truck and took the seat beside him. She unwound the scarf. "I'm Jean Parchman of the *News-Flame*. I understand you're the new Chief Court Jester."

Dan started to answer.

From the front seat Buttoney said, "I'm taping all this, Jean honey. Okay?"

"Certainly. That's the law." She had light blonde hair and a pretty, faintly feckled face.

"Yes, I'm the new jester," Dan said.

Tomlin started the truck and they turned out onto the narrow highway that led in lazy arcs through the dry fields that surrounded the spaceport.

"My uncle helped design this Super Roadway," said Buttoney over his shoulder.

"It has a nice shape to it," Dan said.

"Your name is?" asked the girl.

"Daniel Godfrey. From the planet Barnum."

"How long have you been in the entertainment line?"

Dan said, "I've always had an interest in the performing arts."

"Jean honey," said the JG Enforcer, "I'll give you the bio throwaway that the Senior Informer's Office has made up on Dan. You can skip that part of it, huh?"

"Certainly," said the girl reporter, smiling at the back of Buttoney's head. "What's your favorite vegetable?"

Dan hesitated, waiting for Buttoney to turn again. Dan said finally, "Squash."

"Favorite color?"

"Blue."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

The girl sighed and relaxed. She crossed her legs and hooked her folded hands over her knee. "I think that takes care of it."

Dan asked, "You don't take notes?"

"No," said Jean. "Enforcer Buttoney will just give me a transcript of his bugtape. Lots easier."

FIELDS passed and houses appeared. The road circled in and out between them. The few people who were outside seemed to drift inside as the official car approached.

The houses were small, thin walled. With mud roofs and opaque windows. "The slums?" said Dan.

The girl elbowed him gently. "One of the suburbs of Prime Territory's Capital City."

"Compact housing is the order of the day on Murdstone," explained Enforcer JG Buttoney.

They traveled for nearly twenty miles and neither the houses nor the people changed. The only variety was afforded by the occasional movements of groups of white uniformed men among the houses.

"Police?" Dan asked Jean.

"No," she said. "Enquirers."

"Which means?"

"We have," said Buttoney, talking across his resting elbow, "periodic quizzes."

"To give prizes?"

"To determine who'll be shot each day," said Buttoney.

"There's a public shooting twice a day," said Jean, turning to look out the window.

"We get some swell turnouts

for the executions. It's entertaining and it keeps the lowers in place."

"Murdstone," said the girl, "is a two class planet. In each of our territories there are two classes. The lowers and the ruling."

"I don't know much about politics," said Dan.

The truck was pulling now as the road began to climb through gradual hills. There were no houses anymore. Slowly all around a forest appeared. Tall green leafed trees, stretching away in neat rows, long strips of cool shadow between them. Up here there was no dust storm.

"No housing within a mile of the Capital," said Jean.

Dan nodded. To make conversation he said to the girl, "And what's your favorite food, Miss Parchman?"

She glanced at him, smiling. "MPF."

Dan frowned. "MPF?"

"Multi Purpose Food," said Buttoney. "The lowers eat that exclusively."

"You're . . . ?"

"Lower," said the girl. "But since I work on the paper I'm allowed to live within the walls. Quite a few lowers are for various reasons."

"Darn good little reporter," said Buttoney.

In front of them on the road now was a wall fifty feet high. It was grey in color and made of

some glistening pock surfaced material. No opening appeared in the wall.

"Excuse me," said Enforcer JG Buttoney as the truck stopped some dozen yards from the big wall. "I'll trot up and identify us." He left the halftrack and walked with his hands over his head, stopping flat against the wall. Buttoney muttered something and a small slit opened in the wall at eye level.

"They have his retinal pattern on file," said Jean.

"I thought so," said Dan.

Tomlin turned his head and winked at Dan. "Some fun, isn't it?"

Dan didn't answer.

THEY rehearsed outdoors. In a square of dull yellow grass behind one of the garage areas. From here you saw the backside of the palace, high blank walls and towers.

"Timing is everything," said Tomlin, selecting a new tomato from the basket that rested near his feet. "This time don't flinch. When I grind it into your face don't react right away. See? Count up to three, slow. Then you casually reach inside your coat and get the eggs. Got it?"

Dan had on a loose suit, similar in style to Tomlin's. His hat was different and had a removable brim for comedy purposes. "When do you think we'll go on?"

Tomlin lifted his head and looked at the blank walls behind them. He patted his right hand three times on the flat of his hat. After a few seconds he said, "Friend of mine on monitoring today. He'll aim the pickup gun away for awhile and we can talk with out being recorded."

"They record us?" asked Dan. "All the time?"

"For the files of the Enforcers and Enquirers. Now then. What do you know about the setup here on Murdstone?"

"I haven't," said Dan, "learned much in the two days I've been here. I read the *News-Flame* every morning. Mostly for Miss Parchman's column. There's not much news in it."

"Okay," said Tomlin, putting his hand on Dan's arm. "Listen. The whole planet is ruled here from Prime Territory Commander Brix is in charge of The Board of Rulers."

"I saw a poem about him on the front page of the paper."

"The Poet Laureate has a daily feature about old Brix. The thing I want you to understand is this. The government is pretty shaky. There's a guy named Felix Quarrie. A rebel, with a growing guerrilla army. He hangs out in the undeveloped areas of Murdstone, of which there are a lot. Quarrie you won't read about in the paper. They pretend he does not exist. All the tightening of

rules, though, is to try and stamp out the guerrillas. What kind of mood do you think this puts Commander Brix in?"

"A lousy one."

"Right. Do you know where the last Court Jester went?"

Dan blinked. "To a better job?"

"He was the morning execution three weeks ago."

"Great fringe benefit that is," said Dan. "That's great. How'd he work that?"

"Brix wasn't amused. You see, they have us come in and try to cheer them all up at banquets and board meetings. Bastian, your predecessor, didn't go over too good at a pretty gloomy board meeting. So, no more Bastian."

Dan sat down on the grass. "Swell. Great. And when is it we go on?"

Tomlin shrugged. "They're in so foul a mood they apparently don't even want to see us. There are some serious meetings going on." He took a couple more tomatoes from the basket and started juggling them. "No jokes about guerrillas or rebels. Try to make everybody laugh. That's my advice to you." He tossed the tomatoes into Dan's lap and gave his unseen friend the signal to start recording again.

A CHILL draft seemed to be circling the alcove just beyond the board meeting cham-

bers. Dan tried pacing but he kept getting tangled in his baggy pants. He stopped and checked over again the ripe fruit and vegetables that Tomlin had laid out on the wooden benches against the wall.

Tomlin came silently in the backway with some plyofilm bladders filled with ink and glue. "Sure fire stuff," he said, making room for them next to a still life of tomatoes and bananas.

Dan nodded and moved up to the thick curtain that masked the alcove. There was an eye size spy hole in the curtain so that jesters might watch the meeting room and come in on cue. The wide round meeting room was hung with scarlet draperies. In its center was a vast rectangular table with a dozen heavy chairs around it. None of the board members had arrived yet.

For two weeks now Dan had been working up an act with Tomlin. The first summons to perform had come this morning. Dan was uncertain. But Tomlin assured him their new routines were sure fire. He jumped when Tomlin touched his shoulder. "What?"

The fat assistant clown handed him an earplug speaker. Tomlin inserted one in his own ear and said, "They should be shuffling in soon. This is to let you know what's being said."

Twisting in the tiny speaker

Dan went back to watching the board room. The far doors whipped open and an old man in a fur trimmed jade green uniform came in. Two green uniformed men of lesser rank helped him by the elbows.

Tomlin took a look. "Counselor Mather," he said toward Dan's free ear. "In charge of Child Welfare."

Mather was put in a chair half way down the table. As soon as his aides let go his arms he whacked one of them with his gold-tassled riding crop. "Must not squeeze so hard next time."

Eventually eleven chairs were filled with Counselors, Enforcers and Enquirers.

Tomlin unscrewed his ear speaker and held it out from his head. "Should be time for Commander Brix to appear."

Dan squinted, his eye touching the curtain. The entrance doors were held wide by two broad shouldered guards. Then six trumpeteers dived into the room. The blast made Dan jump back. When his head cleared he looked again. The board members were standing. At the table's head was a small old man, covered with white and gold. He wore a short jacketed uniform with gold trim, gold medals and gold buttons. From his gold crash helmet fluttered a fan-like white plume. On his right side hung a gold blaster pistol and on his left a gold

sword. His face was walnut like and his white eyebrows made a thick straight line over his small eyes. All the wrinkles of his face pointed downward. The Commander coughed once and put his fingers carefully against his mouth. "Well, boys, let's get cracking."

Dan wandered away from the peephole and strolled by the fruit and vegetables.

"This propaganda thing," Commander Brix was saying, "has got my goat. These silly guerrillas are making points with the lowers. How are we going to quash it?"

"Well," said someone, "here's my thinking on it. Let's step up the shootings."

"Wait, wait," said another voice. "Let me hitch-hike on that idea if I may. How about instead of just the same old run of the mill firing squads we introduce a hangman or two? Maybe even a headchopper if the budget allows."

"Budget isn't the problem. I think we should go for saturation on the shooting angle. Step up the executions per day."

"But how do people really feel about shooting? I'm asking because frankly I am not sure. Couldn't we run a check? That would be the way to really find out for sure. See if hanging or decapitating would go over as well."

"Flogging," cried Counselor Mather. "When we had good old-fashioned flogging there wasn't half the sassiness there is now."

"What say we run a test on it? Out in Territory #14 we start hanging them and in #20, say, to name a territory at random, we set up a chopping block. It would not hurt to try it for a few weeks."

"Flog the whole sassy bunch!"

THE meeting continued. Five and a half hours later it was agreed to give other means of execution a trial run and determine how effective they were in keeping the increasingly restless lowers in check. After considerable debate it was agreed to try a week of flogging out in Territory #23. Counselor Mather also proposed a reward of 100,000 credits to anyone who would get hold of the rebel leader, Felix Quarrie, and thrash him. Then there was some discussion as to the differences and similarities between thrashing and flogging.

Dan and Tomlin ate a few of the props and waited. Nearly seven hours from the starting time of the meeting Commander Brix announced, "My stomach's growling. Let's call it a day."

"How about some jesters to cheer us up?" asked Counselor Mather, slapping something with his riding crop.

"Raincheck that," said Brix.

"I'm too frazzled to laugh. Tomorrow maybe."

The meeting adjourned and soon the big room was cold and silent.

"There's a fine line with ripe vegetables," said Tomlin, starting to gather up their equipment. "Some of this may be spoiled before tomorrow."

"That's it?" said Dan, at the curtain. "We don't go on at all?"

"It works out like that now and then," said Tomlin. "These are troubled times."

"That they are," said Dan, taking the speaker from his ear.

* * *

The next morning, before the heat came on, two Enquirers broke into Dan's room.

"Oops," said Dan, sitting up in his cot and blinking at the broken door. "It was open."

"We always like to break in," said the heavier of the two men. A dark moustached fellow with rosy cheeks. "We picked that up from a Psychological Warfare course. I'm Enquirer JG Weldon."

"I'm Enquirer JG Brinker," said the other. He had a flat pale face.

Dan swung his feet to the floor. The floor and the scatter rug were cold. "Something you wanted?" Yesterday's summons to perform hadn't taken this shape.

Weldon frowned around at the small sparse room. "We'll have to

take him over to an Interrogation Suite maybe, Charles."

"Looks as though, Bryan."

"Book a nice big room at the Enquiry Arms Hotel."

"One sec," said Enquirer JG Brinker. "Perhaps the angle I suggested will pay off and the suite won't be called into play."

Weldon cocked his head. "That's a thought."

Dan put on his robe. "What exactly is going on?"

Brinker took something out of his uniform jacket. "What do you think this is?"

It seemed to be several sheets of folded paper. "Some sheets of folded paper?"

"Is that really what you think?"

"Or it could be letters or notes. I don't know."

"You see?" Brinker asked Weldon.

"A put on maybe," replied Weldon.

"Here look," he said, handing the stuff to Dan.

It was a pamphlet. Printed hastily on cheap grade paper. "It's a book, huh?"

"A booklet," said Brinker. "You haven't paid enough attention to the title."

The pamphlet's face said: Even A Fool Can See; being a Report on the Injustices of Murderstone, and written by a dull-witted person, who never-the-less can Perceive the Numerous

Faults of Commander Brix. A Political Essay by Daniel Godfrey, Court Jester.

Dan slowly held the booklet out from him. "Well."

"Did you write that?" asked Weldon.

"No."

Brinker smile at his partner. "We've checked your movements thoroughly, Daniel. A real sifting job. We can't see how you could have had an opportunity to slip out and have that printed." He didn't take the pamphlet back from Dan.

Finally Dan set the thing down on the bed. "I don't quite get this."

"It's Charles' theory that whoever wrote the booklet simply took your name to use as a symbol."

"I'm a symbol already and I haven't even performed?"

"The show biz sections of the papers gave you quite a lot of space," said Brinker. "Often the name of the Court Jester in Prime Territory is used by the lowers as a synonym for a dull stupid person. Until now there has been no propaganda use of such a name, however."

"Fine," said Dan, sitting down on his cot alongside the pamphlet.

"You seem not to be involved in this," said Brinker. "For now, since you are a newcomer, we'll let it ride."

"Let's go, Charles," said Weldon, "before that waitress I'm fond of in the gruel line goes off duty."

The two JG Enquirers said goodbye and left.

BY midday Dan got the JG Royal Carpenters to put up a new door on his room. He closed the door and sat down in his chair. He took up the pamphlet and started reading it.

Something about it was faintly familiar. As he read, he found himself agreeing with this Daniel Godfrey. When he finished Dan stood up, anxious to go out and start something.

There was nowhere he could go and nothing he could do. He realized that and sat down. He hoped nobody would make any more trouble for him.

Three days later another pamphlet with the Daniel Godfrey byline appeared and the Enforcers and Enquirers moved Dan into an Interrogation Suite. The room was twice as large as his old one at the Palace.

Enquirer JG Weldon dropped in fairly often. "Wouldn't you like to confess?" he was asking again now.

Dan said, "I want to co-operate. The thing is, I didn't write those booklets."

"I'm at sixes and sevens," admitted Weldon. "None of the truth serums got any results."

"That last one made a red spot," said Dan, tapping his arm.

"Our Inquisitor Androids drew a blank."

"Is that big silver-plated one going to be okay?"

"Yes, he just needs a new generator." Weldon scratched at his moustache. "Even the torture didn't get any answers out of you."

Dan turned away from the JG Enforcer, not saying anything.

"Did we hurt your feelings?" asked Weldon. "I myself wanted to skip the torture. But old Counselor Mather kept agitating for torture."

Dan nodded. "I figure that's why I was flogged."

Weldon's rosy cheeks grew flushed. "We're all afraid of a revolt, you see. Most of us are hoping against hope that you really are the one who authored all this inflammatory propaganda. Then we'd be able to do something about it. We don't have any other leads."

"That's too bad," said Dan.

"Counselor Mather has suggested," said Weldon, "that we execute you as a gesture. It might make a nice spectacle for the people. Should you somehow be the one who is writing the terrible booklets we'd also put a stop to them."

"Since I'm not, the booklets will keep coming out after you do me in. That would give a mys-

tical touch to the whole business."

"I pointed that out to Old Mather. He agreed to settle for a public flogging come this weekend."

Carefully Dan sat down. "I hope I'll be recovered from the last flogging by then."

"We can always postpone a day or so. Not too long mind you. The lowers are really getting violent." Weldon smiled. "If you should decide to confess don't hesitate to call me at anytime. Best take it easy for the rest of today. Get in shape for the big flogging."

WELDON went away. Dan rested tentatively in his chair. They'd left him copies of the second pamphlet to refresh his memory. Dan got one and read it again.

Daniel Godfrey was even better in this one. There was a very well-written and moving attack on Commander Brix and the whole Murdstone government. A step by step program for overthrow was included, too.

After Dan had gone over both pamphlets several times he took up the afternoon edition of the *News-Flame* and skimmed through it. He slowed down for Jean Porchman's column. That he always read in full. The girl turned out a good column, always well-written and moving.

Dan folded up the paper. That's

why the style of the booklets seemed somehow familiar. Not because he'd written them himself in some kind of trance. But because they were written in a style that echoed subtly Jean Parchman's.

Now here was a problem. If he told them his suspicions he might be able to clear himself. Or he could keep quiet and ride the interrogation out. It would mean, at the least, one more beating.

Still, though, from the little he'd seen and heard of Murdstone he agreed with what the girl said in the pamphlets. And Jean Parchman was good looking, too.

Dan decided. He would keep quiet.

* * *

The flogging was called off. The third Daniel Godfrey booklet had been widely distributed in all the territories and it had produced, once read, a general revolt.

This caused Commander Brix himself to visit Dan. His gold helmet had a dent in it and the white plume was askew. "An assassination attempt while I was opening a new MPF cafeteria downtown," the Commander said, seating himself in Dan's chair and putting the hat on his knee. "You still work for us, you know, Daniel."

"Yes, sir."

"Here's what we've decided.

It's a desperate measure but we think you'll comply."

"I get executed, huh?"

"On the contrary. You address a rally in the Palace Bowl. So far the citizens in the Prime Territory area have remained loyal. We intend to let in 5000 of them, hand-picked, to hear your Bowl talk. The talk will also be broadcast to all territories."

"You think a comedy routine will stop the revolution?"

"No," said Brix. "We're going to beat the enemy at its own dodge. You, Daniel, will get up and admit that you indeed are the Daniel Godfrey who wrote the pamphlets. However, you will laugh at the things. Explain that it was a prank. A merry jest."

"That'll work?"

"Propaganda started it, propaganda will stop it. You say it was all a joke. No conspiracy can stand laughter. The fangs will be removed by this little maneuver. Your speech is being written now. You'll speak tomorrow at sunset."

"So soon?"

"These are troubled times."

"I know, I know."

THE five thousand people in the torch-lit audience could not see him yet. From the left stage entrance to the open air theater Dan had watched as the semi-circles of stone seats filled up. Across the empty stage Com-

mander Brix glittered, waiting to go on.

Someone touched Dan's arm.

"Any statement for the press?" Jean Parchman asked.

There was, at the moment, no one around them. Enquirer JG Weldon and Enforcer JG Butoney were still down in the dressing rooms putting on their makeup. The Enforcer Cadets who had led Dan up to the wings had drifted back a few yards.

"Listen, Miss Parchman," he said.

"Call me, Jean, Dan."

"I'll call you Daniel Godfrey if it's okay."

The girl smiled. "We'll talk that over later. They'll kill you after you make this speech, you know." Her head angled slightly in the direction of the Enforcer Cadets. "They're with us. I've come to get you out."

"You have, huh?"

"Yes, it's all been decided."

The Commander stepped warily out on the stage and the Prime Territory Anthem was played. Armed Enforcer Cadets were scattered in the orchestra pit and in the aisles.

"Come on," Jean said, catching at Dan's arm.

"No," Dan said. "I've gotten in enough grief with letting people decide things for me."

"You're dead if you don't come."

"One thing," Dan said as the

music stopped and the Commander started his introduction. "Are there any good beaches around here? Real ones, I mean."

"Yes."

"Wait here," Dan said. "I'll be back shortly."

Fortunately Commander Brix said little more than, "Here is a fine young man to explain things to you. I give you Murdstone's favorite new author and humorist, Daniel Godfrey."

Dan stepped onto the stone stage and walked up to the Commander's side. There was considerable applause and shouting.

"It's all a joke," Brix whispered to him. "Stress that. Add to the script if you like. But get that across." He moved off into the wings.

Dan adjusted the microphone and waited for quiet. Then he said, "Please don't applaud until I finish, ladies and gentlemen. This is a proud moment for me. The government has asked me to announce its resignation. Hence forward I am to be titular ruler of Murdstone, until such time as popular elections can be held. I thank you."

Commander Brix and Counselor Mather tried to get at Dan with gold-tassled riding crops but the audience was coming up on the stage now and the Commander and Mather got carried off into the darkness beyond the torchlight. The armed Enforcers

had hesitated when they'd heard what Dan said. The ones who hadn't decided to join the crowd had been disarmed before anyone could give a counter order.

Dan managed to get back stage to Jean Parchman. "I thought it would be quicker this way."

"How can we know you're any better than Brix?" The girl was pale, shaking.

"You can't right now. You should have considered that before you used my name."

"That just came to me as a gimmick. Once I had the gimmick the stuff all fell into place," the girl said. "Because you're supposed to be a fool."

"How soon can you get Felix Quarrie here?"

"So you can execute him?"

"No more executions. I want to talk to him."

"A day or two."

The citizens of Prime Territory located Dan and carried him around on their shoulders until long after all the torches had gone out.

* * *

There was no pattern to the seagulls' flight. The sand was soft and the sky a warm blue.

Dan folded his copy of the new *News-Flame* on his chest and closed his eyes.

A bare toe nudged his shoulder. "Dan."

He sat up. "Jean."

She spread her towel out next to his. "Mind?"

"No."

"Elections will be next month."

"Good idea."

"You're really serious about this?"

"That's why I made Felix Quarrie temporary President of Murdstone," Dan said. "See, I finally decided. The best times I've had have been between jobs. I'm not cut out for Data Processing or Android Supplementing or Pre-Clerical or Court Jesting. I just like to hang around the beaches."

"You don't want to run Murdstone?"

"No. I'm not cut out for that either." He grinned at the girl. "That's why I took advantage of my position here. And granted myself lifetime unemployment insurance. My last official act."

The girl shook her head. "It's not that bad an idea I guess."

"Let me buy you a soft drink or something?"

Jean said, "No thanks, Dan. I'm in a real rush. I can only stay a few minutes."

Dan nodded and stretched out again. He closed his eyes.

THE END

*In Moderan—a demoniac version of The Shape of
Things to Come If We Keep On the Way We're Going—
a demoted official reviews his . . .*

ONE FALSE STEP

By DAVID R. BUNCH

ALL winter we four worked in those far-flung mechanism—clogged tunnels under the land, repairing spring. Slogging around in our space boots down there in the dark and cold we were fixing the broken leaves, adding new flips to the root stocks and retouching iron petals so that all would be in readiness for a perfect automatic season to leap through the yard holes at a nod from the Central Commission for Beauty. We hated our unmanly work, and we did not love one another. But we loathed one another with a sufferance that allowed for an exchange of agonies. All four of us had fallen from something, and I had fallen farther than any of them.

Today, for perhaps the twentieth time this winter, I felt I must out with my story, for sometimes to live, after the fall, is a thing past quiet bearing. We paused

by a leaf we were mending, and the others extended me deference, for there lingered with them still the reminder of what I had once been above ground, as well as the fact that I was Captain here.

"To have fallen to leaf mender," I said. "To have toppled to bulb duty and stem repair! Oh MAC, MAC!" I cried in anguish, for MAC was our three-letter deity, origin shrouded in mystery, antiquity and a thousand conflicting legends, but perhaps it was merely a short saying of machine. "As you know, I was once of the proud Population Fixes," I bragged, recovering my composure somewhat. I let the bright buttons on my space jacket tighten as my chest heaved full and I took that special relaxed guardsman's stance in my glistening patent space high-tops. "My service, called Grinder Control, and more

usually just the Grinders, was top glamour, there's no doubt. Now, let us pause here by this leaf to be mended and review my fall." They could but comply since I was a Captain for Spring Mending, in other words the straw boss of this grubby detail. The other three, in their less well-cut space jackets and their shorter boots of the fall from the lesser commission, stood like sullen dogs. Had I come to crying on such shoulders? Oh yes!

[T was in autumn," I began. "A time for falling? YES! I had worked up through the advancements until now I commanded a big Grind-5, the largest and fin-

est of the machines for controlling the populations, as you know. I had worked hard, and while in the ranks I thought I was 'proofed' against temptation. But perhaps the leisure of command gave me too much time." I looked down the rows of the leaves, I regarded the metal calyxes. I came back to the silent three, standing like sullen dogs still, but I knew they were enjoying not working. "Somewhere I softened," I cried in true agony.

"It was in autumn, as I have said, but a bright day. It was one of the most beautiful automatic autumn days that we have ever had in this land, thanks to a strong administration in Central



Illustrator SUMMERS

Season Control that year. The metal geese were moving—South, just right, with that special honk-squawk in their tapes; the leaves were all painted. There was a tang to the air, and once, calling up a far-back memory, I thought I smelled chilled apples on a tree, and I'm sure, unless my senses played me tricks, we rolled between two fields of metal pumpkins. Either I was dreaming or the Autumn Commissions had really gone all-out. But anyway, somehow I'm sure my senses received false stimuli and I softened."

The three stood abject and silent, still facing a broken leaf, and for a moment I even suspected they were sleeping. I wanted to rush to them and slap them until their faces broke. I wanted to pull their eyes out an extra inch, cup their ears to megaphones and set the three of them up on metal flowers to hearken to me. I wanted to cry, "Regard! you ears and eyes and brains of blockheads who have fallen from nowhere, regard and respect a giant fallen to be among you!" But they nodded after awhile, ever so slightly, all three of them, to show that they were still with me, and I let it go. "We were getting behind! They were increasing so fast! Maybe it was the strain of duty." And I remembered that black bright day.

"We had received a call to 'fix' a district, delinquent in the southern-west, a district so overcrowded that the surplus people were starting to get in the way of the operation of the machines. My crew was chosen because we had the best record, measured in the only way such records can be measured, in pounds delivered to Central Meat. Our Grind-5 rolled out on those big balloon-ball wheels that day, quiet as a rubber cat padding through rubber leaves. We homed in on the delinquent district, all six-man crew of us, and I was the Captain. The decisions were mine!" My flat spaceguardsman's stomach knotted in pain anew and fresh-remembered remorse was mine for all the lost opportunity, all the fallen prestige, gone with everything those last four words implied: The decisions were mine!

I N the delinquent district the preliminary work had already been done, as is usual, and the candidates for Grind were pre-selected, courtesy of the local administration. The victims were being held in a gray building of bare plastic walls reinforced by viciously barbed steel rods, and a shimmer of light all around the inside of the prison room, keeping prisoners well back from the walls, told where meshed knife blades whirled like

banks of fans. Not a reassuring place in which to stand accused. NO! —Presumably the people selected to go were those who had made the lesser contribution to living in our crowded land. They were the delinquents who, in the opinions of local officialdom, had not paid for their living space by inventing enough time-saver devices. As goes without saying, time-saver devices are our main obsession now as we flaunt our space clothes and space blue prints and dream of the Conquest. Baffled and turned back still, we long for the big Space Victory and go on filling our small crowded planet with petty gad-goes.

"But my course was plain that day in the southern-western district; I was the Captain and duty was routine. All I had to do was spring down in my black guardsman's boots and my space jacket colored like night, with all my achievement and extra poundage medals gleaming like stars, and salute the local dignitaries with the proper deal of snap and preciseness. Then my men would know what to do; they would set up to sausage the people who stood accused of not inventing enough gadgets. I would not have even to murmur the orders." I looked to the three not-listening dogs for a sign of sympathy and found none. But I did not care now. '

"The rest is history. All of you know, have read, how Blonk's Grind-5 stood for three full days idle in a delinquent southern-western district. While some of the best execution potential of all times—my crew—worked like women, searching through papers and records. Before grinding a single man! And how the poundage was under for that mission, and how the quota had to be revised in all the other districts, and how some men had to go to the Grind who were not listed by LOCAL DECISION. And of course you know, have read, have heard! how I was removed—Blonk, once the most awesome of all the Captains with the poundage record gleaming on his chest—drummed out! For what they called 'Unseemly vacillation and indecisiveness'. Oh, for one soul-struck moment, to lose all. What happened? MAC, MAC! what happened?"

I RUSHED over to the three sleeping knaves, who had fallen from lesser things, and I shook them to awareness. Blinking and yawning there in the gloom, there among the root-stocks, the metal leaves and the buds of the automatic season we were fixing, one of them said the cue, asked the question, and by a great strength of will I refrained from beating them with my green and red striped swagger

stick loaded with lead. "What did you do?"

Again I relived that moment, that bright black day in the autumn season, and the autumn—nay! winter, as it turned out—of my glory. "The big Grind-5 was drawn up near the gates of the compound—polished to gleaming as befit the machine of the Grinder ace, he who had stormed the very gates of fame's splendor with his good records. My men were in their special blue uniforms of the ace crew of the Grind, with the unit citation in the form of a startling red jewel, shaped like a falling blood drop, pinned to their tunics. And I was in my high boots and the night-black garb of the Captain with the efficiency record gleaming in gold. What did I do!?"

"I strode down slowly from the Captain's turret that day, stood for awhile in the door to survey the autumn weather, drew myself up to my full height, my shoulders so broad then in my uniform in the time of my splendor, my chest so full and rib-sprung as to seem almost unreal. I stood looking at the local dignitaries and *knew* they were seeing a god. Then—" My mind reeled and almost faltered to blankness in recalling what I had done. Although it was clearly written that every Captain of Crew held the invested right, the thing was not a thing to be done.

"After standing for awhile god-like before them and surveying the autumn metal, I patted my night-black gauntlets together in a little moment of unseemly contemplation, walked leisurely down the ramp, saluted in a manner of calculated cynicism and then—and then I issued the strange terrible order!"

I looked at them and saw they were wide awake now and wide-eyed with fear, for, after twenty recitals, they knew when the story was ending. I rushed to them, and I started to beat them with my green and red striped swagger stick loaded with lead, as they expected me to do, as I always did in my wrath just before the end of the story. As I whacked them, they kept dutifully asking, hoping for easier blows, "What did you do—what was the strange terrible order?" But I did not answer at once; I was enjoying too much the bludgeon-blows I was raining down on these flinching and shivering men. After awhile each one lay in a fine pool of blood, gasping and miserable at the foot of some metal plant. And through a froth bubble on each man's quivery lips I could see they were still framing the proper and dutiful question, as they knew they should do, as they knew I required of them, "What did you do—what was the strange terrible order?"

Then in that icy-calm-stillness which always followed my awesome display of wrath, I gave the cold-steel order for each prostrate and blood-soaked man to resume his feet and his stem-and-bulb duties at once. And as I moved to a table to fill out the required and proper forms for them each, after duty hours, to appear at Central Whip for punishment due ("for blood stains on uniform") I answered their question, recited like litany the scope and terrible depth of my fall: "I once questioned LOCAL

DECISION for fairness; I once issued the order for JUSTICE; I once dillydallied before grinding men." And as, idly, musingly, I wrote and underlined twice, heavily, on each man's proper form, the reason for punishment due at Central Whip—"Careless and excessive bleeding on uniform without proper cause"—I suddenly knew I was cured. I had the hang of it again. By the great god MAC, if I could only get them to believe me up there! I was ready for topside and the world of MEN again! **THE END**

COMING NEXT MONTH

Keith Laumer's new novel is the blockbuster feature of the June issue of **FANTASTIC**. *A Hoax in Time* mixes the ultimate computer, two unlikely heroes, a beautiful girl, and the Internal Revenue Department in a vortex of time travel that ranges from the million-year-old past to a future alternate universe. Comic? Yes. Satiric? Yes. Action-packed? Yes.

Bob Arthur returns to **FANTASTIC** in June with a terror-filled tale of a macabre world within a mirror. Not just any mirror, mind you; but *The Mirror of Cagliostro*, the medieval master fantasist.



Other short stories and our regular departments round out an issue not to be missed. June **FANTASTIC** on sale May 21.



THE SCREAMS OF THE WERGS

By JAY SCOTLAND

Illustrator ADKINS

The Wergs were photophobic. But the tourists didn't care if they caused them pain. They popped their flash bulbs anyway. And only one man was sensitive to the agony of the extra-terrestrials.

EGBERT LESTER, the S.P.C.E.T. career agent assigned to Wergleman's Planet, was sitting in his plyboard hutch reading a cheap edition of a life of the Roman dictator Fabius when the Wergs all screamed.

Flip, the book went into the air. Crash, Egbert's stool went over. Zip, an expression of righteous rage dropped into well-formed grooves in Egbert's long, morose face. Wham, the flimsy walls of the hutch, three-sided, roofed and affixed to the greenish-damp wall of Troop's Cavern, shook and vibrated as Egbert bumped against them in his haste to rush out onto the walk.

"I heard that! I heard that, I definitely did!" he cried, running.

His zeal was so great that he nearly propelled himself over the guard rail at the walk's edge. Below the rail a chasm dropped away to black. The black was relieved only here and there by whorls of pinkish gas escaping

from the porous green stone. Egbert hung on the rail, gasping. Then he righted himself. His shoes had an angry sound as he went slipping and scrambling up the path.

The Wergs were still screaming. Awful sound! Of course he hadn't seen the flash, because his hutch walls and the bends of the walk masked it. The screams were sufficient evidence, though. Yes, more than sufficient.

Puffing, he climbed the last twelve stairs and burst onto the relatively wider promenade. Since it was daytime, all the blue solar cell blips in the walls were turned on, but the light was still dim. The promenade section was the chief tourist attraction in Troop's Cavern, not to mention practically the only attraction on Wergleman's Planet whatsoever. Wergleman's was an indistinguished hunk of mineral as planets went. The two things which lured Terrans in small numbers were, in order of importance, the copper-

like ore lodes and the Wergs, as the extra-terrestrials were called.

How many Wergs actually lived in Troop's Cavern a mile and a half under the crust, few could say. But there always seemed to be at least a half dozen of the creatures on hand for the twice-daily rocket stopover of The Outer Rim Happiness Tour #17.

THERE were a half dozen Wergs on hand now, Egbert saw, clustered out there on the shelf on the other side of the chasm. They lived in caves dimly glimpsed back in the dark. Now they were rolling and bounding and jumping like tumblers. The sight sent a twitch of horror through Egbert Lester. It wasn't funny. Neither were the screams.

The screams were a combination of a mew and a yowl. Two of the Wergs, eye membranes temporarily shut down over their round yellow anthropoidal-type eyes, were frantically banging their heads against the wall beside the shelf where they lived, to alleviate, Egbert Lester was sure, the agonizing pain.

"I heard that!" Egbert cried again, rushing forward. "Bingo, I distinctly heard that."

"Heard what?" Al Bingo's eyes were bland and piggy in his lump of a face. "I dint hear nothing, except the tour rocket taking off."

"I suppose you don't hear the Wergs screaming right this minute?"

"Well, yeah, they are makin' a little fuss."

"Someone took a picture of those poor creatures."

"Sure. They always take pitchers. So what?"

"The Wergs," said Egbert like a prosecutor, "do not emit the sounds which are now dying away, and which can only be described as screams of purest agony—I repeat, the Wergs do not emit such sounds when tourists use *only* their cameras and ordinary eight-X fast. *Somebody* had a *light*."

Al Bingo leaned laconically against a post upholding the sign which had been one of Egbert's first accomplishments upon being stationed on Wergleman's Planet. The sign, firmly embedded in rock, read:

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO VISITORS

The only living inhabitants of this planet, whom you are now observing in their native habitat, are hypersensitive to light. Devices such as flashguns, bulbs or permalites used for picture making will produce in the extra-terrestrials symptoms which obviously express acute internal pain. Please use **ONLY** extra-fast film (eight-X is suggested; on sale at souvenir counter, en-

trance level) to shoot pictures of the inhabitants. Violation of this rule is PUNISHABLE by a fine of 100 credits and/or six days in a conditioning center.

By joint order:
Terran Park Service
Society for the Prevention
of Cruelty to Extra-
Terrestrials

IN Egbert's opinion, Guard Al Bingo was a no-good, sly, malingerer Park Service career man. This was never more evident than now. Bingo righteously plucked invisible lint from the sleeve of his slovenly uniform, said, "I dint see any light, Lester."

The Wergs were whimpering and twitching all over the shelf on the far side of the gloomy cavern. Just one was still crashing his skull, albeit more gently now, against the rocks. Egbert's heart bled.

"Of course you didn't see any light!" As he sneered, Egbert backed off a step. He was afraid of the man's bulk. In his dreams he often dreamed of throttling him. "One of those insensitive, arrogant, got-rocks tourists who come swaggering through here every day slipped you ten to pretend not to see the light. Oh, I get the whole picture, all right. 'Guard, I simply must have one good shot of the Wergs. And not

one of those fuzzy, muddy views everybody *else* brings back."

Al Bingo thoughtfully manipulated the end of his blotchy nose. His voice was a stentorian rumble: "You holier-than-thou little bastid! You callin' me a liar?"

"Worse!" Egbert was afraid, but he was also totally gripped by the situation which had become, in the past months, intolerable. "Worse, Bingo! I'm calling you a greedy bribetaker. If I had my way—" Egbert's cheeks reddened. "By God, if I had my way—"

"But you don't." Bingo cracked his knuckles. "Why, I oughta take you apart for them insultin' remarks. But we both know you ain't got no real authority round here. Your job here's just a sop to the bleedin' hearts. So I'll just tell you to—"

Egbert blanched, gripping the rail beside the chasm. Al Bingo was being contemptuously explicit. At the end he added, "An' when you get done doin' all them things I suggested, why, you can go take the case up with Cap DuBrow, since he's the one who calls the shots."

Wanting to fall on Bingo and assault him but prevented by a higher allegiance, Egbert took another look at the half dozen Wergs. They were composed now, but still huddling together, shadows in shadow. Their yellow eyes were soulful.

"This situation has become intolerable, Bingo. I intend to ignore your obscene insults and follow your last suggestion, to the letter." Egbert hurried off.

"Good luck," Bingo jeered. "Cap DuBrow, he's a real humanitarian." As Egbert rushed into the elevator he heard Bingo's last mumble: "God! If this post aint lousy enough without a damn do-gooder on your tail alla time!"

THE tube rose through the rock, its taped punched for the topmost level. Egbert beat his fist against the metal wall. How, how, how could humanity be so impervious, so blind, to the screams of the Wergs?

Why did everyone balk him at every turn? Even, sometimes—yes, he had to admit it—his wife Renee? She commented that he occasionally went overboard on the subject.

Overboard? On what was clearly a question of humanity? Of morality? Impossible!

The tube whished to a halt. Egbert didn't immediately open his eyes. For a moment he was overcome with a delicious vertigo in which he visioned himself in a position of power from which he could do something, honestly *do* something, about the pitiful plight of the Wergs.

Oh, if he only had the authority. He'd make them see the

right, by enforcing it first and winning them over later.

Idle dream, though. Wishful thinking. He was forced to work within the practical exigencies of the moment. Opening his eyes and clamping his lips together, Egbert left the elevator with a brisk step.

The practical exigencies of the moment were typified by the senior Park Service officer on Wergleman's, Capt. Finch B. DuBrow. He commanded the three dozen staff guards, twelve per shift, stationed throughout the labyrinth of Troop's Cavern. DuBrow, although a career man too, was slightly better educated than Guard Bingo. In Egbert's opinion, however, he sprang from the same bestial stock.

He found DuBrow in his office. The Captain had a simulmag open to a travel spread devoted to hunting big game on Mumford's Third Companion. The spread's central illustration depicted some sad alien beast lying on its side, guts opened with a stim pellet. Again Egbert blanched.

"Something I can do for you, Mr. Lester?" DuBrow's eyes were two pebbles in a mortar slab. He was well-conditioned, hard and—Egbert knew—completely unfeeling.

"The situation with the Wergs below," Egbert began. "It's intolerable."

DuBrow closed the simulmag, bored. "Which situation?"

"The pictures. DuBrow, I'll have to ask that no more cameras be allowed in the Cavern."

DUBROW bristled. "See here. That's a matter of Park Service policy. Are you aware of the profit we make on film alone at the souvenir stand? I'm afraid I'll have to remind you, Mr. Lester, that you're on station as a concession to the bleeding—to the S.P.C.E.T. people nothing more."

Egbert slammed his fist against the desk. "But you're supposed to cooperate with me! Pay heed to my suggestions!"

"Frankly, Lester, since you take that nasty tone, I may as well tell you that some of your suggestions strike me as pretty airy-fairy. Such as your notion that we shouldn't let tourists bother the Wergs at all."

"I may have been a bit hasty when I proposed—"

"Yeah, hasty is a good word. Naturally the decision is mine. I couldn't possibly go along with you. The Wergs seem to congregate on that shelf without any prodding from us. I've never noticed that they mind the tourists."

Egbert drew himself up. "I'm positive they *do* mind, DuBrow."

"Oh yes? From what evidence?"

"A man in my profession—dedicated to humanitarian principles—to put it bluntly, DuBrow, I empathize."

The Captain stifled a snicker. "If you weren't serious, Mr. Lester, you'd be a joke."

"And if you weren't such a damned thick-skinned brute, you'd see all too clearly that your man Bingo—a human ape who deserves to be shot!—is accepting bribe money from the tourists so he'll turn his back and overlook it when they take illegal flash shots. Shots, which, DuBrow, result in the agonies of hell for the Wergs."

"You know that for a fact?" returned the other, adding hastily, "Yeah, yeah, don't tell me. Empathy."

Egbert's wave was theatrical. "For God's sake, DuBrow, have you ever heard them *scream*?"

"Of course. But how do I know what it means if our language people don't? Maybe they howl because they're sexhappy and a flash gets them all hopped up. I'm no baboon's mind reader, Lester. And neither are you."

"Baboon!" Egbert howled, jiggling from foot to foot. "Baboon? Of all the provincial, utterly blind, coarse and stupid terms with which to libel an extra-terrestrial, that is the worst I have ever heard. That is the—"

He stopped. He was aware that Captain Finch B. DuBrow was

waving at him, in a placating manner.

Egbert sniffed. "Well. Don't tell me I've finally made an impression."

DuBrow sighed. "I'm willing to listen. Just to shut you up."

RAPIDLY, triumphantly, Egbert repeated his accusations against Guard Bingo. "And I am sure, DuBrow, I am morally certain beyond all doubt, that such sudden, high-intensity flashes of light are unbearable for those poor creatures. I am equally morally certain beyond all doubt that Guard Bingo is taking bribes, in the interest of self-aggrandizement."

"Whatever that means," DuBrow mumbled. Then another sigh whistled out from between his thin lips. "Mr. Lester, I wish I were so certain about everything. That's beside the point, though. Can you furnish evidence? In order to discipline Bingo, I must have evidence."

"Why? I *know* he's guilty."

"But I don't."

"DuBrow, I tell you I *know*—"

"In other words," the Capt. interrupted, "you did not see him actually take the cash you allege he took?"

"No, no! But he'll never let me see, either. He'd never risk taking money if I were hanging around. And there's no place where I can observe him secretly

in the daytime, when the tourists come. The only place to hide is that little alcove in the wall of the promenade. Dim as they are, the daytime service lights make hiding there impossible. But I tell you again, DuBrow, I'm positive he's guilty."

The Capt. picked up his simulmag. "He may be. Unfortunately I can't do a thing without evidence."

About to issue a stinging retort, Egbert Lester abruptly noticed a detail he had overlooked before. From the breast pocket of Captain DuBrow's dress uniform a small corner of something purple-papery protruded. DuBrow noticed Egbert's noticing. For a moment the Park Service officer flushed. Then he buttoned the pocket flap and turned his back.

"Sorry," said DuBrow over his shoulder. "No evidence. You understand."

"Yes," Egbert said darkly. "I certainly do. Now."

The glance DuBrow flung him as he left was enough to make Egbert, even within his moral armor, shudder all over.

AT lunch in the efficiency apartment, one of several carved out of the rock of the first level, Egbert revealed everything to his plump, pert wife Renee:

"At last I see exactly how the cards are stacked against me in this rotten sinkhole. I spotted a

five credit note sticking out of DuBrow's pocket. You can be sure he hid it quickly enough. But the damage was done. He knows I know everybody of this station is paid by computer chit. A credit note means DuBrow's been taking bribes too. Guard Bingo is probably cutting him in for fifty percent of what he clips off the tourists. Or maybe it's hush money. Maybe DuBrow discovered the stinking scheme and demanded payment."

Pouring nutrient beverage from a tarnished silver pot, Renee made a *moue*. "How can you be sure, darling? I mean, perhaps there was a barracks dice game, something like that."

"Nonsense!" Egbert cried. "Renee, why do you think I've chalked up such a good record with the Society? It's because they know I'm always extra-sensitive to rotten, inhuman deals like the one I've unearthed here."

Renee's blue eyes rested briefly on the wall. The wallpaper hung in disorderly strips. It was impossible to keep anything permanently affixed to the damp rock. Her look, quickly concealed, said she wasn't so sure the record chalked up by her husband was all that excellent. Out of sympathy she didn't put the feeling into words. But she did offer one mild argument: "Sometimes, darling, I think you're too involved in your work."

"What the devil's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. It's wonderful to feel sympathy for those dumb hairy creatures. And I know it hurt you deeply when that delivery man beat your dog to death for nipping his boot. But that was thirty-two years ago! You were only eight. Impressionable."

"Renee." Egbert's voice chilled. "I fail to see—"

"Darling, I'm simply trying to say that one delivery man is not the whole population of the universe. You ought to at least try to see the other side."

"The other side of what?" he challenged. "The other side of cruelty to dumb extra-terrestrials is, cruelty." His eyes shone. "If only I had the authority, Renee, I'd show them they could not get away with such hideous acts. Anywhere!"

Renee frowned. "But maybe you go about it the wrong way."

"Renee, in God's name what's come over you?"

"I'm only talking this way for your sake, dear. I've been thinking about that sign you put up on the promenade."

"What about the sign? I fought with DuBrow for weeks over it. Now I see why he resisted so stubbornly."

"But you don't at all."

"What?"

"The sign—well, if the Captain is taking money the way you say

he is, the sign actually makes his business boom!"

"Renee, maybe you ought to drop into the dispensary, have a chat with the mentalist."

NOW it's my turn, dear—non-sense. You have to admit this one fact. Until that sign went up, there was very little trouble with flashguns in the Cavern. I mean, someone now and then sneaked a picture with a light, yes. But as soon as you erected that billboard, things got worse. The sign became a sort of goad, don't you see? What a person is prohibited from doing sometimes becomes ten times more attractive.

Egbert glared. "I'll just have to make the appointment for you myself. As soon as possible."

Renee was crestfallen. "Darling, I only tried to suggest a possibility, an idea!"

"The threat of a stiff penalty is the only way to stamp out the evils of human nature, Renee."

Renee gave up. "You may be right."

"Of course I'm right. The problem is, what can I do about it right now?"

"File your customary report, I suppose."

"And wait months and perhaps years for the moribund old men who style themselves executives of the Society back on Terra to get around to contacting their

equally moribund opposites in the Park Service? Oh, no. Who knows what damage the Wergs may suffer in the meantime?"

He leaned over the table, nearly upsetting the pot of nutrient beverage as he gestured. "I tell you, Renee, the whole S.P.C.E.T. administration on Earth is top-heavy with doddering, self-seeking bureaucrats. What the Society needs is a new broom. Someone with guts enough to nail down the orders and then enforce them, come hell or high water. Why are you making that abysmal face?"

"No reason, darling. It's just that—well, I wish you wouldn't read so many of those books about generals and military men and all. I think it has a bad effect on you."

"It certainly does," he agreed promptly. "I see how successful others have been in carrying forward worthy causes and necessary reforms and I get very depressed."

Egbert was staring at the ring left by his overflowing cup of nutrient beverage. Consequently he didn't see Renee start to speak, to tell him that wasn't what she had meant at all. But she didn't speak.

"The situation is intolerable," he repeated. "Something must be done."

Renee rose. "Probably a report would be best, dear. Excuse me,

but Egbert Junior will be coming home from supervised play at the mine camp any minute." She left the kitchen.

EGBERT brooded on about the futility of fighting immorality by writing reports that vanished into circular files. Then, with the barest flicker of his eyelids as a sign, he had his answer.

How strange, he commented to himself. How prosaic. That the great clang of the hammer on the shackle of bondage first sounded in this mean, paper-peeling kitchen underground on Wergleman's Planet, so far from Earth. When they wrote his biography (Egbert was so entranced with his plot that he thought *when* they wrote, not *if* they wrote) they would mention that Egbert Lester, who had risen through the ranks of the S.P.C.E.T., over the objections of hundreds of bureaucrats who were afraid of him and holding him back, to become the Society's ranking executive, had conceived his daring stroke at his own kitchen table. But where else should humble stewardship be exercised, if not in a humble setting?

The plan had pitfalls, of course. There were distinct possibilities of publicity, trial, imprisonment, even forced adjustment.

So?

This was a moral issue. A burning, burning *moral* issue.

He would act. Tonight.

* * *

Hours later, after he was sure Renee and Egbert Junior were asleep in their separate rock-walled cubicles, he rose from his own foam cushion and slipped into his clothes. At this late hour, the dozen Park Service guards on duty were all stationed at the various aboveground entrances, to make sure no drunken miners from the nearby mineral lode camps stumbled in and lost their way by accident.

Egbert knew the station layout by heart. He had no difficulty finding his way to Captain DuBrow's cubicle in the near-dark. From a locker he'd seen open once before, Egbert extracted an ugly, sinister stim pellet pistol in a holster. Carrying it, he slipped to the elevator. He descended quickly to the level of the Wergs.

He advanced across the rock promenade in the feeble, eerie light of the blue solar cell blips, only one in six lighted at night. The green rock walls dripped. Egbert stole toward the rail, breathing rapidly.

About a dozen Wergs were curled up in a teddy-bear pile on their shelf across the chasm. A dozen would do nicely for a start. Egbert clucked to them gently, keeping the stim pellet pistol out of sight behind his back.

"Wake up, you poor things, wake up, *chee-chee-chee*." Egbert's passable imitation of their normal cries made one, then two, stir. Membranes flew up. Yellow eyes shone across the abyss, dumb, fond, trusting.

Tears began to trickle down Egbert's cheeks.

"Wake up now, all of you, *chee-chee-chee*."

Lethargically, a Werg blinked. It was like someone signalling by darkening a lantern. The extra-terrestrial shambled to the edge of the shelf. Egbert whipped up the stim pellet pistol, tears laving his cheeks. As his finger tightened on the trigger he sobbed, "Believe me, this is for your own good. I can't stand your suffering any longer—"

"I knew he was going to crack!" a hoarse voice yelled. "Grab him, Bingo!"

Shapes materialized out of the gloom behind Egbert. He whirled too late. A hand clamped on his wrist and tussled for possession of the weapon. Egbert's tears of pity changed to tears of rage:

"Spying on me? Behind my back? Waiting for me—let go, Bingo! You're not getting this gun—"

He gave a furious wrench and was free. Captain DuBrow rushed from the alcove in the rock where, apparently, he and Al Bingo had been lurking, unseen thanks to the sparsity of

night lights. Guard Bingo circled Egbert warily. The latter was backed against the rail, brandishing the stim pellet gun and sobbing, "Stay away, stay away, you immoral, bestial—"

"Gimme that gun!" cried Bingo, lunging.

"Hold up!" DuBrow cried, fumbling with some sort of equipment. "We need evidence!"

Bingo skidded to a halt. And before Egbert could howl against the unspeakability of it, DuBrow had the camera at eye level.

DuBrow was taking no chances on a fuzzy image from plain eight-X film. The white eye of the flashgun winked, dazzling. Just before the Wergs began to scream, Egbert felt something like a tiny insect sting on his neck. Then the Wergs let loose.

The torment of the screams unmanned him, dissolved his courage. Bingo leaped forward to wrench the pistol away. Egbert sobbed impotently, his mind tormented by visions of the hells he'd inflict on these coarse, cruel men, should he ever be given the chance. Which he knew he never would be.

DuBrow's face, quite close now, gloated. "We talked it over after I saw you, Lester, you jerk. We decided you might pull some stunt like this. We thought maybe you'd try to turn all the Wergs loose. We couldn't have you queering a good deal, now could we?"

Especially when the pay out here's as low as it is. Why, I *bank* that dough the tourists cough up."

"I'll report you," Egbert cried, without much heart.

DuBrow clucked sadly. "Sorry you're feeling so upset, Lester old boy. Job got you down? Lonely, so far from Terra? Happens all the time. I've already put in for a new resident agent. I think you need a nice long rest. I think you'll get it when they see that picture I took. I think nobody's going to believe any of your ridiculous accusations, either. Not when you're so obviously suffering extra-terrestrial brain fatigue. Bingo? Hang onto the camera. Let's go Mr. Lester up to the dispensary right away. Do you suppose the doc'll have to break out those restraining sheets?"

THEY didn't find it necessary.

Egbert Lester was docile, with Renee beside his bed holding his hand. But drugged as he was, the screams of the Wergs haunted him. He'd failed.

But not because he was not right. Oh no! He'd simply made the gamble and lost to the forces of inhumanity.

In due course the Lester family was rotated home to Terra, and a new S.P.C.E.T. assigned to Wergleman's Planet. Egbert was chastised for an excess of

zeal by the Society's ranking executive officer. Of course the old fool understood nothing of the situation. He shook his head over DuBrow's photo, characterizing the scene it depicted as "most unfortunate, yes, most unfortunate." Egbert was let off lightly, however, since mental fatigue and crackups were hazards of career officers who worked far from Terra. Shrewdly Egbert did nothing to disabuse the Society about his true motives, or rather about his motives being wholly sane.

He made a pious show of sorrow when, rounding out his three months spent on staff at the Society, he was given a thorough mental and physical examination. He came through with flying colors:

"The strain will pass, Mr. Lester," said the internist at the concluding interview. "And you're in remarkably tiptop physical shape, too. Oh, your blood does show the presence of several of those peculiar wafers—"

Egbert blinked. "Wafers, doctor?"

"An unusual little cell structure. Don't fret about them. We've analyzed them up one side and down the other. At first they seemed to slow down the human metabolism slightly, but that has only proved temporary. Otherwise we've detected no untoward effects. We'll give you regular observations, of course, just

to check up. These things have been cropping up lately during routine physicals of people who've visited Wergleman's as tourists. Apparently the wafers are some sort of bacteria we're not familiar with. We call them wafers for want of a better term. Care to look at a slide of one?"

"Thank you, no," Egbert said listlessly. "I'm due at Society headquarters in half an hour to find out about my new post."

An insignificant one, as it turned out.

So were all the other posts during the ensuing years in which Egbert Lester was rotated from planet to planet with monotonous regularity; a minor, very minor official of the S.P.C.E.T. He knew his bold plan with the Wergs had cost him promotions. Out of necessity he resigned himself. He read his lives of Fabius, of Napoleon and others, and nursed his private vision of the gross immorality of mankind, including mankind's blindness to truth and right which was, no doubt, still manifesting itself, in the profiteering from the flash picture racket on far off Wergleman's.

When Egbert was approaching his forty-eighth birthday—he was stationed on Humboldt's Thirteenth Belt World, and the sting on his neck the night of his failure was long forgotten—the People's United Revolution began.

IT wasn't until toward the end that those who found themselves rather arbitrarily lumped with the victims, as opposed to the smaller core of revolutionary reformists, discovered that the most zealous revolutionaries had all, in their day, been to Wergleman's Planet as tourists.

Had, indeed, surreptitiously taken flash pictures of what they ignorantly thought were the primary inhabitants of the world.

Had not seen, in the microsecond of universal blindness when the white light flared, the fast but perceptible flight of the tiny Wergs, across the chasm, to the flesh of the humans, who now became their hosts. Those queer cell units which seemed capable of directing their hosts like puppets, through some chemical process, had long ago been lightly christened the Wafers.

The actions of their puppet hosts were far from light.

In the riots, the looting, the toppled governments and the million-at-a-time deaths which were, of course, morally cleansing for society, the one fact almost lost in obscurity was the fact that the wafers had apparently been unwilling, in their mysteriously sentient way, to migrate to hosts who could ultimately seize the power for them. Unwilling, that is, until they discovered the blind-ing white camouflage of a simple camera flash.

Karharty, an anti-revolutionist, wrote a paper in his death cell. Its thesis was later authenticated by revolutionary leaders who had apprehended the traitors who had spilled everything. A few of the hosts, it seemed, were not completely subjugated. But they were soon caught.

The paper by Karharty maintained that the Wafers had revealed, during whatever sort of communion they held with their hosts, that the shrieks of the near-forgotten Wergs did not come as the natural reactions of the extra-terrestrials to light. Rather, the screams were reactions deliberately induced and stimulated by the Wafers, to serve as additional misdirection and cover during the perilous interval of migration the instant the flashes went off. Which came first, the plan of conquest or the means—the white flashes—was a chicken-and-egg question nobody, not even Karharty, could fully answer. On that point, the

Wafers and their hosts were discreetly silent too.

Karharty was executed and his paper destroyed.

The execution party was personally commanded by that socially conscious firebrand, that implacable foe of injustice, the Terran who, the victims said, had been unlucky enough to become the host for the Wafers' commanding general, if parasitic cell armies can be said to have generals. The poor Terran made a good show of knuckling under to the conquerors, though. Probably, said the more charitable victims, he had a family to think about.

He conducted Karharty's execution, and many other executions, with dash. He was a crowd pleaser. The slim crowds left over after he visited the various planets, dispensing justice, had an admiring name for him.

They called him Red Hands Lester.

THE END

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MONOLOGUE for TWO

By HARRISON DENMARK

The time? Anytime-now. The place? Everywhere-nowhere.

The plot? Life-death. The characters? You-me-both-I.

—Thank you, nurse, but I can manage the chair with one arm. the wheels turn quite easily.

—Good morning, Doctor. Nice place you've got. Nice country.

—No, I've never been here to see you before. Maybe I do look familiar, though . . .

—My trouble? Oh, that. Would you take a look at the muscle of my left calf, please?

—Sorry, I can't bend forward to roll up the trouser. No, you'll have to raise the leg yourself, too.

—Yes, that's right. There is no muscle in my left calf.

—What's wrong, Doctor? You don't look so well, all of a sudden. Do you recognize the surgical technique?

—Sit down, by all means. No, I don't smoke, thank you.

—What's that? It lit itself for you? Yes, that happens sometimes.

—No, I didn't think there was anything you could do for it. Just

thought I'd check up though. Science is always making wonderful advances. I know you did some pioneer work in transplantation and, well, I thought you'd know, if anyone would.

—Yes, Polish. I'm a doctor myself. Haven't practiced since the war, though, and I'm afraid I haven't kept abreast of all phases of the healing arts. —Institute of Medicine in Warsaw, yes, that's right. I was doing my internship back when you started your research . . . —Don't be modest. I know you were only a member of the staff, and that Ravensbroek was a big place. Still, so is the world, and I managed to find you here, just as you found me there.

—That ash is going to fall on your nice carpet. Just drop it in the tray as it floats by.

—Very good.

—What do I want? Oh, perhaps just a moment of your time. I've had a hankering in

recent years to practice medicine again, myself. Surgery requires two good hands, though, and that transplant experiment you tried didn't come out so well. Still, I might make a good diagnostician . . .

—Dead! No, somehow that didn't happen. Was it Schopenhauer who said that even life itself is an act of will? I forget. Anyhow, the tubercular bacilli didn't do their job properly—neither did the Type AB blood, even though I am Type O—nor the starvation diet.

—It might have been that whole wild syndrome you imposed, or maybe it was the yoga I practiced to keep from going mad—or both of them—that gave me the Power. —No, stay in your chair!

—See what I mean? I have the Power. It wasn't so strong in those days, back when I crawled from the ruins of Ravensbroek with a bullet in my heart, but I've been working on it a lot since.

—Kill you? Goodness! Whatever gave you that idea? I have no desire to kill you. No, the man in the wheelchair isn't going to hurt anybody . . .

—But you, Doctor, what do you think of the Power? —I know you're not a psychiatrist. But don't you think it could be a great aid to a medical man?

—So do I, yes. So when I heard

you were going to turn this into a charity clinic, I decided to come see about a job.

—What? —Nothing about a charity clinic? —Oh, you're wrong. We're going to treat the poor, the uneducated, the maimed and the blind. We're going to deliver babies and administer free medicine. After all, we're rich, aren't we?

—No, you don't understand. You can't refuse to operate, because you're only going to be the assistant. You don't think I'd trust you with a scalpel in your hands, do you? Your rich patients will just have to find themselves another hand-patter.

—You'd better put your cigarette out now. Never mind, I'll do it. There. Now this is going to hurt me much much more than it's going to hurt you. I loathe the thought. Your body is the coffin of a dead soul, and your hands are the instruments of murder—but they can be put to good uses, and maybe atone for some of what you've done.

—Your eyesight? Yes, that's the Power working now. I've spent almost twenty years developing it to this point. Just relax. Another second will do it.

—There!

—See all right, now? The chair? Oh, you'll get used to it. The wheels turn quite easily.

—Nurse! Come in here! The patient has fainted. **THE END**

Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant

By HOWARD R. GARIS

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant is beyond doubt the most delightful spoof on the man-eating plant theme ever written in science fiction. If it were submitted today as the work of a new author, it would be instantly purchased as a satiric gem.

Oddly enough, its author, Howard R. Garis is best known for his "Bed Time Stories," of Uncle Wiggily, the rheumatic old rabbit with the top hat and full-dress suit, along with a retinue of ducks, an old-lady muskrat, an alligator, a villainous fox and a full cast of "humanized" woodland creatures.

Before his death on Nov. 6, 1962, in Amherst, Mass. at the age of 89, Garis had written 15,000 short stories about his rabbit character. At the height of their popularity they were syndicated daily in 100 newspapers here and abroad and the best of them collected into 75 books

(some still in print) have sold more than five million copies. In addition, scores of toys, games (many invented by Garis) and other products have used the name of Uncle Wiggily or one of the other characters from the series.

Virtually buried in anonymity under this mass of bedtime stories were Garis' sf stories published in ARGOSY. The following story was one of a series which would eventually include such intriguing titles as Prof. Jonkins and His Busier Bees, Quick Transit by Beanstalk, Ltd., and His winged Elephant. These stories followed a vogue of the era for tales poking fun at strange new inventions.

Though the science fiction or "invention" dime novels of the time may have inspired the horseplay trend which Garis helped carry on, it also served as the prototype for a far more sig-

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nificant and influential series. Just at about the time the dime novels were succumbing to the pulp magazine, Edward Stratemeyer, one of the greatest of the dime novel writers, started a syndicate in which he produced low-priced hard-cover books aimed at youngsters and teen-agers. One of the most successful series (second only to *The Rover Boys*) was that featuring the young in-

ventor Tom Swift. Everyone knew that the syndicate was made possible by a staff of "ghost writers." The death notices of Howard R. Garis finally substantiated the fact that he had written the first 35 of the Tom Swift books. The authorship of that series elevates Garis to a position of importance as one of the most influential science-fiction writers of our time.

AFTER Professor Jephtha Jonkin had, by skilful grafting and care, succeeded in raising a single tree that produced, at different seasons, apples, oranges, pineapples, figs, cocoanuts, and peaches, it might have been supposed he would rest from his scientific labors. But Professor Jonkin was not that kind of a man.

He was continually striving to grow something new in the plant world. So it was no surprise to Bradley Adams, when calling on his friend the professor one afternoon, to find that scientist busy in his large conservatory.

"What are you up to now?" asked Adams. "Trying to make a rose-bush produce violets, or a honeysuckle vine bring forth pumpkins?"

"Neither," replied Professor Jonkin a little stiffly, for he resented Adams' playful tone. "Not that either of those things would be difficult. But look at that."

He pointed to a small plant with bright, glossy green leaves mottled with red spots. The thing was growing in a large earthen pot.

It bore three flowers, about the size of morning glories, and not unlike that blossom in shape, save, near the top, there was a sort of lid, similar to the flap observed on a jack-in-the-pulpit plant.

"Look down one of those flowers," went on the professor, and Adams, wondering what was to come, did so.

He saw within a small tube, lined with fine, hair-like filaments, which seemed to be in motion. And the shaft or tube went down to the bottom of the morning-glory-shaped part of the flower. At the lower extremity was a little clear liquid.

"Kind of a queer blossom. What is it?" asked Adams.

"That," said the professor

with a note of pride in his voice, "is a specimen of the *Sarracenia Nepenthis*."

"What's that? French for sunflower, or Latin for sweet pea?" asked Adams irreverently.

"It is Latin for pitcher plant," responded the professor, drawing himself up to his full height of five feet three. "One of the most interesting of the South American flora."

"The name fits it pretty well," observed Adams. "I see there's water at the bottom. I suppose this isn't the pitcher that went to the well too often."

"The *Sarracenia Nepenthis* is a most wonderful plant," went on the professor in his lecture voice, not heeding Adams' joking remarks. "It belongs to what Darwin calls the carnivorous family of flowers, and other varieties of the same species are the *Dionaea Muscipula*, or Venus Fly-trap, the *Darlingtonia*, the *Pinguicula* and *Aldrovandra*, as well as—"

"Hold on, professor," pleaded Adams. "I'll take the rest on faith. Tell me about this pitcher plant, sounds interesting."

"It is interesting," said Professor Jonkin. "It eats insects."

"Eats insects?"

"Certainly. Watch."

THE professor opened a small wire cage lying on a shelf and took from it several flies. These

he liberated close to the queer plant.

The insects buzzed about a few seconds, dazed with their sudden liberty.

Then they began slowly to circle in the vicinity of the strange flowers. Nearer and nearer the blossoms they came, attracted by some subtle perfume, as well as by a sweet syrup that was on the edge of the petals, put there by nature for the very purpose of drawing hapless insects into the trap.

The flies settled down, some on the petals of all three blooms. Then a curious thing happened.

The little hair-like filaments in the tube within the petals suddenly reached out and wound themselves about the insects feeding on the sweet stuff, and which seemed to intoxicate them. In an instant the flies were pulled to the top of the flower shaft by a contraction of the hairs, and then they went tumbling down the tube into the miniature pond below, where they were drowned after a brief struggle. Their crawling back was prevented by spines growing with points down, as the wires in some rat-traps are fastened.

Meanwhile the cover of the plant closed down.

"Why, it's a regular fly-trap, isn't it?" remarked Adams, much surprised.



"It is," replied the professor. "The plant lives off the insects it captures. It absorbs them, digests them, and, when it is hungry again, catches more."

"Where'd you get such an uncanny thing?" asked Adams, moving away from the plant as if he feared it might take a sample bite out of him.

"A friend sent it to me from Brazil."

"But you're not going to keep it, I hope."

"I certainly am," rejoined Professor Jonkin.

"Maybe you're going to train it to come to the table and eat like a human being," suggested Adams, with a laugh that nettled the professor.

"I wouldn't have to train it much to induce it to be polite," snapped back the owner of the pitcher plant.

And then, seeing that his jokes were not relished, Adams assumed an interest he did not feel, and listened to a long dissertation on botany in general and carnivorous plants in particular.

He would much rather have been eating some of the queer hybrid fruits the professor raised. He pleaded an engagement when he saw an opening in the talk, and went away.

It was some months after that before he saw the professor again. The botanist was busy in his conservatory in the mean

time, and the gardener he hired to do rough work noticed that his master spent much time in that part of the glass house where the pitcher plant was growing.

For Professor Jonkin had become so much interested in his latest acquisition that he seemed to think of nothing else. His plan for increasing strawberries to the size of peaches was abandoned for a time, as was his pet scheme of raising apples without any core.

The gardener wondered what there was about the South American blossoms to require such close attention.

ONE day he thought he would find out, and he started to enter that part of the conservatory where the pitcher plant was growing. Professor Jonkin halted him before he had stepped inside and sternly bade him never to appear there again.

As the gardener, crestfallen, moved away after a glimpse into the forbidden region he muttered:

"My, that plant has certainly grown! And I wonder what the professor was doing so close to it. Looked as if he was feeding the thing."

As the days went by the conduct of Professor Jonkin became more and more curious. He scarcely left the southern end of the conservatory, save at night,

when he entered his house to sleep.

He was a bachelor, and had no family cares to trouble him, so he could spend all his time among his plants. But hitherto he had divided his attention among his many experiments in the floral kingdom.

Now he was always with his mysterious pitcher plant. He even had his meals sent into the green-house.

"Be you keepin' boarders?" asked the butcher boy of the gardener one day, pausing on his return to the store, his empty basket on his arm.

"No. Why?"

"The professor is orderin' so much meat lately. I thought you had company."

"No, there's only us two. Mr. Adams used to come to dinner once in a while, but not lately."

"Then you an' the professor must have big appetites."

"What makes you think so?"

"The number of beefsteaks you eat."

"Number of beefsteaks? Why, my lad, the professor and I are both vegetarians."

"What's them?"

"We neither of us eat a bit of meat. We don't believe it's healthy."

"Then what becomes of the three big porterhouse steaks I deliver to the professor in the green-house every day?"

"Porterhouse steaks?" questioned the gardener, amazed.

"Do you feed 'em to the dog?"

"We don't keep a dog."

But the butcher boy questioned no further, for he saw a chum and hastened off to join him.

"Three porterhouse steaks a day!" mused the gardener, shaking his head. "I do hope the professor has not ceased to be a vegetarian. Yet it looks mighty suspicious. And he's doing it on the sly, too, for there's been no meat cooked in the house, of that I'm sure."

And the gardener, sorely puzzled over the mystery, went off, shaking his head more solemnly than before.

He resolved to have a look in the place the professor guarded so carefully. He tried the door when he was sure his master was in another part of the conservatory, but it was locked, and no key the gardener had would unfasten it.

A month after the gardener had heard of the porterhouse steaks, Adams happened to drop in to see the professor again.

"He's in with the *Sarracenia* *Nepenthis*," said the gardener in answer to the visitor's inquiry. "But I doubt if he will let you enter."

"Why won't he?"

"Because he's become mighty close-mouthed of late over that pitcher plant."

"Oh, I guess he'll see me," remarked Adams confidently, and he knocked on the door that shut off the locked section of the green-house from the main portion.

"Who's there?" called the professor.

"Adams."

"Oh," in a more conciliatory tone, "I was just wishing you'd come along. I have something to show you."

PROFESSOR JONKIN opened the door, and the sight that met Adams' gaze startled him.

The only plant in that part of the conservatory was a single specimen of the *Sarracenia Nepenthis*. Yet it had attained such enormous proportions that at first Adams thought he must be dreaming.

"What do you think of that for an achievement in science?" asked the professor proudly.

"Do you mean to say that is the small, fly-catching plant your friend sent you from Brazil?"

"The same."

"But—but—"

"But how it's grown, that's what you want to say, isn't it?"

"It is. How did you do it?"

"By dieting the blossoms."

"You mean—?"

"I mean feeding them. Listen. I reasoned that if a small blossom of the plant would thrive on a few insects, by giving it

larger meals I might get a bigger plant. So I made my plans.

"First I cut off all but one blossom, so that the strength of the plant would nourish that alone. Then I made out a bill of fare. I began feeding it on chopped beef. The plant took to it like a puppy. It seemed to beg for more. From chopped meat I went to small pieces, cut up. I could fairly see the blossom increase in size. From that I went to choice mutton chops, and, after a week of them, with the plant becoming more gigantic all the while, I increased its meals to a porterhouse steak a day. And now—"

The professor paused to contemplate his botanical work.

"Well, now?" questioned Adams.

"Now," went on the professor proudly, "my pitcher plant takes three big beefsteaks every day—one for breakfast, one for dinner, and one for supper. And see the result."

Adams gazed at the immense plant. From a growth about as big as an Easter lily it had increased until the top was near the roof of the green-house, twenty-five feet above.

About fifteen feet up, or ten feet from the top, there branched out a great flower, about eight feet long and three feet across the bell-shaped mouth, which, except for the cap or cover, was

not unlike the opening of an immense morning glory.

The flower was heavy, and the stalk on which it grew was not strong enough to support it upright. So a rude scaffolding had been constructed of wood and boards, and on a frame the flower was held upright.

In order to see it to better advantage, and also that he might feed it, the professor had a ladder by which he could ascend to a small platform in front of the bell-shaped mouth of the blossom.

"It is time to give my pet its meal," he announced, as if he were speaking of some favorite horse. "Want to come up and watch it eat?"

"No, thank you," responded Adams. "It's too uncanny."

The professor took a large steak, one of the three which the butcher boy had left that day. Holding it in his hand, he climbed up the ladder and was soon on the platform in front of the plant.

Adams watched him curiously. The professor leaned over to toss the steak into the yawning mouth of the flower.

Suddenly Adams saw him totter, throw his arms wildly in the air, and then, as if drawn by some overpowering force, he fell forward, lost his balance, and toppled into the maw of the pitcher plant!

There was a jar to the stalk

and blossom as the professor fell within. He went head first into the tube, or eating apparatus of the strange plant, his legs sticking out for an instant, kicking wildly. Then he disappeared entirely.

Adams didn't know whether to laugh or be alarmed.

He mounted the ladder, and stood in amazement before the result of the professor's work as he looked down into the depth of the gigantic flower, increased a hundred times in size.

HE was aware of a strange, sickish-sweet odor that seemed to steal over his senses. It was lulling him to sleep, and he fought against it. Then he looked down and saw that the huge hairs or filaments with which the tube was lined were in violent motion.

He could just discern the professor's feet about three feet below the rim of the flower. They were kicking, but with a force growing less every second. The filaments seemed to be winding about the professor's legs, holding him in a deadly embrace.

Then the top cover, or flap of the plant, closed down suddenly. The professor was a prisoner inside.

The plant had turned cannibal and eaten the man who had grown it!

For an instant, fear deprived

Adams of reason. He did not know what to do. Then the awful plight of his friend brought back his senses.

"Professor!" he shouted. "Are you alive? Can you hear me?"

"Yes," came back in faint and muffled tones. "This beast has me, all right."

Then followed a series of violent struggles that shook the plant.

"I'll get you out! Where's an ax? I'll chop the cursed plant to pieces!" cried Adams.

"Don't! Don't!" came in almost pleading tones from the imprisoned professor.

"Don't what?"

"Don't hurt my pet!"

"Your pet!" snorted Adams angrily. "Nice kind of a pet you have! One that tries to eat you alive! But I've got to do something if I want to save you. Where's the ax?"

"No! No!" begged the professor, his voice becoming more and more muffled. "Use chloroform."

"Use what?"

"Chloroform! You'll find some in the closet."

Then Adams saw what the professor's idea was. The plant could be made insensible, and the imprisoned man released with no harm to the blossom.

He raced down the ladder, ran to a closet where he had seen the professor's stock of drugs and chemicals stowed away on the oc-

casion of former visits, and grabbed a big bottle of chloroform. He caught up a towel and ran back up the ladder.

Not a sign of the professor could be seen. The plant had swallowed him up, but by the motion and swaying of the flower Adams knew his friend was yet alive.

He was in some doubt as to the success of this method, and would rather have taken an ax and chopped a hole in the side of the blossom, thus releasing the captive. But he decided to obey the professor.

Saturating the towel well with the chloroform, and holding his nose away from it, he pressed the wet cloth over the top of the blossom where the lid touched the edge of the bloom.

THERE was a slight opening at one point, and Adams poured some of the chloroform down this. He feared lest the fumes of the anesthetic might overpower the professor also, but he knew they would soon pass away if this happened.

For several minutes he waited anxiously. Would the plan succeed? Would the plant be overcome before it had killed the professor inside?

Adams was in a fever of terror. Again and again he saturated the towel with the powerful drug. Then he had the satisfac-

tion of seeing the lid of the pitcher plant relax.

It slowly lifted and fell over to one side, making a good-sized opening. The strong filaments, not unlike the arms of a devil fish, Adams thought, were no longer in uneasy motion. They had released their grip on the professor's legs and body.

The spines which had pointed downward, holding the plant's prey, now became limber.

Adams leaned over. He reached down, grasped the professor by the feet, and, being a strong man, while his friend was small and light, he pulled him from the tube of the flower, a little dazed from the fumes of the chloroform the plant had breathed in, but otherwise not much the worse for his adventure.

He had not reached the water at the bottom of the tube, which fact saved him from drowning.

"Well, you certainly had a narrow squeak," observed Adams as he helped the professor down the ladder.

"I did," admitted the botanist. "If you had not been on hand I don't know what would have hap-

pened. I suppose I would have been eaten alive."

"Unless you could have cut yourself out of the side of the flower with your knife," observed Adams.

"What! And killed the plant I raised with such pains?" ejaculated the professor. "Spoil the largest *Sarracenia Nepenthis* in the world? I guess not. I would rather have let it eat me."

"I think you ought to call it the cannibal plant instead of the pitcher plant," suggested Adams.

"Oh, no," responded the professor dreamily, examining the flower from a distance to see if any harm had come to it. "But to punish it, I will not give it any supper or breakfast. That's what it gets for being naughty," he added as if the plant were a child.

"And I suggest that when you feed it hereafter," said Adams, "you pass the beefsteaks in on a pitch-fork. You won't run so much danger then."

"That's a good idea. I'll do it," answered the professor heartily.

And he has followed that plan ever since.

THE END

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Love Story

By LAURENCE M. JANIFER

All the world loves a lover—except certain physicists who find that too much love upsets their theories. In this tale of a man who loved, perhaps not wisely but too well, you'll find humor, pathos—and a vital moral.

ONCE there was a man who loved people. Really there was. And he really loved people. Due entirely to the tender force of his affections, day and night were shortened to four hours each, and the whirling of this pocked and petty planet became a puzzle to physicists. For love, as you may find in Volume II of the *Chansons Nationales et Populaires de France*, makes the world go round. (There is normally just enough love for one complete spin every twenty-four hours—that is, of course, the ordinary sort of love people bear toward other people who have neither injured them and created a feeling of dislike nor, much worse, helped them and created the intolerable feeling of obligation.)

The physicists, however, didn't believe *anything* they read in the *Chansons Nationales et Populaires de France*. They didn't believe what they saw in the works of Lewis Carroll, either, or W. S. Gilbert, or even Miss Alice Mary Smythe (compiler of the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations). Instead, they preferred to believe only what they could prove—meaning, naturally, only what they could make other people like themselves believe, with a minimum of trouble.

These physicists, disbelieving in the very idea of love, were naturally puzzled by the rotatory eccentricities of our globe. As a matter of fact, a paper published in the *Semi-Weekly Journal of Modified Surprises for Physicists*

under the title of *Rotatory Eccentricities of Our Globe* consisted of practically nothing but puzzlement, and thus became the first paper published in that August volume which failed to offer at least two solutions for any problem under discussion, together with a soothing assurance of how complex (but provable) everything was.

The author of this unusual paper was a man of great standing in the scientific community, and he had four marks of identification. His colleagues knew him, first, by a signal which he had received from his parents, second by one inherited from a grandparent, third by the gift of a dim and distant ancestor, and fourth by a brand which he had received (as an award) from a convocation of other physicists. These four means of identification were, in order, James Syverson Hattie, Ph.D. Furthermore, though he was only twenty-seven years old, he was reputed by his colleagues to have the brain of an eighty-year-old man. He was better at proving things than most physicists, and he could find even more unlikely things to prove.

The brain of an eighty-year-old man, however, inside a twenty-seven-year-old body, is prone to dislocations and disturbances. James Syverson Hattie, Ph.D., fell into the trap of a most disturbing dislocation, as a matter

of fact, directly after seeing his paper in what passed for print among the learned societies. He became prey to the phenomenon of externalization.

Psychiatrists tell us, on virtually no provocation (and even in long articles entitled *The Phenomenon of Externalization*), that this particular dislocation may lead to all sorts of complications. So it was in this case.

Having written his paper (and, more importantly, having actually seen it in a sort of print, being distributed to other physicists like an inky and intellectual manna), Hattie, as he was familiarly known, had externalized his puzzlement over the world's increased rate of spin. Now, having none left, he naturally became convinced that he had solved the problem. If we asked them (and, very probably, even if we didn't), psychiatrists would tell us that such delusions can be highly dangerous, and not only to the person who provides them with food and lodging.

THE problem continued to worry other physicists, and Hattie's cheerful assurances that all had been solved were no help to frayed nerves. While his colleagues spent hours at their desks working on applications for new Government grants which would allow them further to study matters, Hattie passed his time in

developing new theories of air resistance through the use of paper airplanes, or chinning himself on the railing round a local Bevatron.

When the floor of his laboratory was entirely covered by paper airplanes resting after one or another flight, and when Hattie's chinning-record reached forty-seven, he was visited by a delegation from the State University, where physicists put out to pasture were enabled to teach younger physicists how much was known, and how little anything not known mattered. The delegation was in a highly irritable state, and were not soothed by Hattie's confident smile and happy welcome.

"Dr. Hattie," said the head of the delegation, a physicist with a long white beard and an expression of insufferable wisdom, "we understand that you claim to have solved the problem with which we have all been faced. I refer," he went on, so that there might be no mistake, "to the revolution of the earth upon its axis."

Hattie picked up a few paper airplanes and looked at them reflectively. "The revolution is dead," he said in a sunny, pleasant voice. "Long live the revolution." Then he began to sail the paper airplanes at the delegation, which refused to catch them and attempted to evade their trajectories. One caught in the white

beard of the head of the delegation, and that personage plucked the airplane out and frowned at it as if it had neglected to hand in its homework.

"We would like some proof of your assertion," he said then, apparently to the airplane.

Hattie felt a strange sinking sensation. But he rallied bravely. "Proof?" he said. "Certainly. Tomorrow."

The bearded physicist looked at him sternly. "Tomorrow?" he asked.

Hattie nodded. "Tomorrow," he said.

The delegation wheeled round and left. After a second, and with an air of ineffable disgust, the bearded physicist returned, dropped his paper airplane on the floor, and went away again without a word.

* * *

Hattie sat alone for many hours, lost in thought. He knew, he kept telling himself, that the problem was solved. But, try as he would, he couldn't think of the solution. And unless he could do that, how could he assemble any proof? There was, after all, nothing definite to prove.

At last he came to the conclusion that a disturbing factor existed. That, he realized with relief, was all that could explain the gap in his mind where, he was perfectly sure, a solution should have been. (Of course we,

who know better, can see in this an inexorable working-out of the laws governing the phenomenon of externalizations: the subject is convinced of the reality of his own thoughts and seeks external justification for them. Hattie, however, being inside the phenomenon, had no idea it was there, and we can feel only pity for so deluded a creature.)

The disturbing factor, obviously, was the man who, according to such unscientific persons as Lewis Carroll, W. S. Gilbert, the anonymous compilers of the second volume of the *Chansons Nationales et Populaires de France* and Miss Alice Mary Smythe, was responsible for everything: the man, in short, who loved people.

That much, Hattie told himself, was quite clear. He said: "Hmm," to himself several times, first in D and then in E-flat, and then he announced in a loud, clear voice: "The thing to do with a disturbance is to get rid of it."

Now, ordinary disturbances were simple enough to get rid of. Students could be ejected, politi-

cians mystified and other physicists disproved. But the case of a man who simply sat down and loved people seemed a little special.

In the end, there seemed only one thing for Hattie to do, and so he went and did it.

He shot the man who loved people. The man died quickly, due to Hattie's immense knowledge of such physical devices as revolvers. When the man who loved people died, he was still loving people. He was even loving James Syverson Hattie, Ph.D.

Unfortunately, Hattie never really had a chance to see if the disappearance of his disturbance resulted in the discovery of a definite solution. These things (as he told the bearded physicist) take time, and he wanted at least a week to think matters out.

But he didn't have a week.

For three days after the man who loved people had died, the world spun on its axis—the accustomed 24-hour period.

Then, suddenly, the earth's rotational speed began to pick up again. And soon it was spinning as fast as before. Even faster.

THE END



ACCORDING TO YOU

(Continued from page 4)

be." The author has failed to discard the universally accepted fiction on which he has been brought up. The fiction splits reality in two parts—physical reality and mental (non-physical) reality. Both psychologies, academic and para-, further subdivide the theorized mental reality (consisting of nothing at all?) into images based on sensory-cerebral sensitivity patterns, and ESP—images supposedly not sensory.

Those science-fiction ideas can be sensibly replaced by a theory which seriously considers the full implications in Einstein's concept of four-dimensional reality. Briefly the theory is as follows.

"Mental imagery" is perception (unitary or compound) by the 4-D (four-dimensional) continuity of the physical senses, of people, objects and events. In common with all items of reality, the genic connection between parents and child is eternal in 4-D continuity. That, considered along with the direct arithmetical progression of the world population increase stemming from common ancestry, leads to this conclusion: perceptions through the senses of anyone, in the past, present or future of 3-D surface life, is available to anyone else through the universal genic-sensory network. If parapsychology

would study the implications of 4-D theory, it could end its aimless floundering about in the fogs of mystery and get on with it.

Nat Rapport

150-88 87th Road

Jamaica 32, N. Y.

● *Is anyone in 4-D rapport with Nat on this?*

Dear Editor:

Having just finished your March issue, I've decided that I can't hold my peace any longer and so I am writing my first letter to this magazine.

The following quotation is by H. L. Gold, speaking as an editor "... I can put aside any personal conviction of mine for the sake of a good story, and insist that the story be true to its theme. 'Willing suspension of belief' is what that used to be called. Jolt that willing suspension into a 'Huh?' and there is a story flaw that needs repairing." All this in reference to "Nine Starships Waiting," March issue. Now, this story had a lot going in its favor. The story-idea was stunning, (I dig these superman type stories). The plotting was good. But do you know what? The thing was all but incomprehensible! It's no fun to have to read and reread a passage to keep up with the goings-on. And it's a crying shame 'cause Zelazny shows great promise. But he writes all of his stories like that! Perhaps I have trouble with

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his stories because I'm a leetle thick, but I prefer not to think so.

This brings to my mind two things that disturb me about the new authors and the sf they are writing. First, there seems to be a trend toward stories seemingly written for and by idiots. Take Jim Harmon. Everything that I have read by him reads like the above statement. The story ideas are babyish or ridiculous and the plotting is as bad. Some might contend that his stories are satires, but if I want to read satire, give me something like "The Face Behind the Mask" or The Space Merchants.

The second of my tribulations concerns style, although the fault, unlikely as it seems to me, may be more mine than thine. I've become so set in my preferences that I can't seem to get used to this stylistic/poetic trend that is springing up (see Vance Aandahl, Zelazny, etc.). However, many of these authors belong to the New Generation and the times are changing, so I suppose it is normal.

P. B. Riley
81 Crescent Street
New London, Conn.

• You puzzle us. On one hand you object to "stories written for and by idiots." On the other, you object when you have to reread a passage to find out what the author means. You cannot have it both ways.



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